

Then there were 5

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Summary: Denman has returned to do a survey for local groups and she has a new girl as her assistant with a secret she thinks Cleo, Emma, and Rikki no longer share and they don't know about Bella at all. Things get crazy as they prepare to do a big unveil.

## 1. Chapter 1: Arrival

Authors Note:

Disclaimer: I don't own any of this except my OC. I'm doing this for the sheer fun of it.

Chapter 1: Australia arrival and an unexpected meeting!

"Time to get up!" Denman's voice called from beside my bed. "Lot's of work to do today."

With an annoyed groan I flipped over and pulled a second pillow over my head. I hoped if I ignored her she'd go away and I could get a few more minutes of sleep. This hope was dashed when I heard the solid 'clunk' of a cup hitting the stand next to the bed followed shortly after by the aroma of real fresh brewed coffee.

"You don't play fair," I groaned from my nest of pillows and blankets.

"There's more where that came from out on deck. Hurry up and it might still be there when you crawl out and join us." Denman's voice echoed with mild laughter.

I tossed off the blankets, sat up, and proceeded to glare at her back as she walked out of the cabin where I slept on our research ship. Not that she could see me do it, but I felt mildly better for it. I turned to the coffee and held my hand over it palm down and fingers slightly curled, I tensed the muscles in my arm and visualized myself drawing away the heat. I could feel it when the temperature of the

coffee lowered a few degrees. Don't ask me how I could tell when it was just right, I don't know how, I just knew it was right.

I took a careful sip and noted the flavor, herbal with a nice smokey finish, and quickly downed the rest. Like most coffee addicts I'll swear to you I could feel it when the caffeine hit, and it gave me the motivation to get on my feet and start picking out my outfit for the day. A nice skirt, a cool new top with floral patterns stitched on it, and some strappy sandals that I'd gotten at the same time. I also grabbed a one piece swim suit to go under it all since we were supposed to end up in the water at some point today. Not that it really made a difference to me but it was a good cover story if we ran into others during the day.

Once dressed I took my now empty cup and headed out on deck. I found Denman talking with the local Fishing Union rep. They were going over the details of the check we were here to do of the local fishing lanes. Or to put it bluntly we were going to check if the fish had moved back to where they used to be prior to recent events.

"Ah Mr. Sertori I'd like you to meet Laura Westbrook. Laura this is Don Sertori of the local Fishing Union," Denman said as way of introduction.

"Unnngh," I vocalized as I picked up the coffee pot and refilled my cup.

"Well it's a right pleasure to meet you Missy," Don answered holding out his hand.

I put down the now empty pot and shook his hand. "Let me finish this and I'll finally be awake enough to follow your conversation, " I said as I lifted my now full cup.

"I know how that is, " Don agreed. "Some of us just aren't fully human until we've had our morning coffee."

I nearly choked on the mouthful of coffee I'd just attempted to swallow when he said that. If only he knew the truth. Denman managed not to laugh at the irony either but only just.

"Am I missing something?" Don asked.

"No," I sputtered and coughed. "I just though what you said is so true that it was funny in a way and it just went down the wrong way when I tried to laugh."

"Oh. Well sorry about that. Didn't mean to make you choke." Don said by way of apology.

"No worries, you're forgiven." I said glad that in my sputtering I'd neither spilled or splashed any of the liquid on myself. That would have been so not good. I really didn't feel like diving over the side into the water first thing in the morning. At least let me get some breakfast first.

Speaking of which I headed over towards the side table where several different breakfast items were laid out and quickly decided on a bagel with some cream cheese. As I looked up from the table I noticed a girl about my age with dark brown hair heading towards us carrying

what looked to be a lunch tote at her side. She skidded to a stop the second she saw Denman and her expression fully embodied the phrase 'if looks could kill'. I had a feeling she was one of the three girls Denman had told me about and made a snap decision to intercept her before she got on board and did something rash, even if Denman would agree she deserved it.

I hopped over the side to land in front of her before she could decide to take another step, thankful no one else had noticed her yet. "Hello there, if you're who I think you are now is not the time to do something rash."

"I don't know what you're talking about," she answered me. "Now please move I'm supposed to bring my Dad his lunch. He forgot it when he left today."

"No. I think you do know what I'm talking about, and I've convinced her she really owes you and the others an apology at the very least. If you stick around after your father leaves you can say what ever you need to say to her. Fair?" I countered

She glared over at Denman, then back at me. "Fair. For now"

"Ok does your Dad know what you were?" I asked

She gave me a strange expression and shook her head. I had no idea what it meant so I just ignored it for now.

"How about this then. Just play it like this is your first meeting with her and let your Dad introduce you. I'll try to let her know while you greet him and hopefully she'll play along until he leaves. Then you two can talk." She nodded her agreement to that. "I'm Laura by the way."

"Cleo."

I made a quick follow me motion and lead the way on board.

"Cleo, what brings you out here?" Don asked rushing over to her.

I quickly walked up to Denman who looked like someone marching her way to a gallows. "She's going to pretend that you've never met before," I quickly whispered. "At least until her father leaves."

Denman nodded and quickly smoothed her expression back to a smile. I though it looked over forced but it's not every day your past mistakes come back to get even with you.

I turned around to face Don and Cleo as they walked up and Don made introductions. "Dr. Denman and Ms. Westbrook I'd like you to meet my daughter Cleo. Cleo this is Dr. Linda Denman and Laura Westbrook"

"Pleasure to meet you Cleo." we both replied, with an honest smile from myself. Denman just looked like she was waiting for the ax to drop.

"Well I must be off. I have to at least try to meet our quota for the day." Don said. "Cleo thanks for bringing me this, I can't believe I

forgot it at home today." He motioned to the lunch tote Cleo had given to him.

"And Sam only reminded you three times not to forget it too. Yet you still did." Cleo looked part annoyed, part frustrated, and part amused with him. Clearly a close family. Made me feel nostalgic for the States and my family.

Don, after one more quick round of hand shakes, quickly hopped over and headed down towards the exit clearly in a hurry to catch the tide. Cleo watched him go till he was completely out of sight then turned to back to Denman and just glared at her in what I could only call a mix of pure fury and total dislike.

"Well? Let's hear it!" she demanded.

I grabbed my coffee and bagel and ducked back into the upper cabin out of view but not out of earshot just in case things went completely south.

"Cleo." Denman started. "I know it won't fix things, and I know it's not much, but for what it's worth I am truly sorry for my actions two years ago. I've had a lot of time to reflect on what I did wrong and what I should have done, as well as some not so subtle encouragement," she flicked her eyes towards where I was hidden.

"And so you came back here just to look us up for that?"

"No. I wasn't going to go looking for you at all if it could be avoided. I felt that might be like rubbing salt in an old wound, but if I happened to run into you then yes I'd apologize to you. Especially after we ran into Emma last year in the Tropics." Denman rubbed the side of her face in memory.

"She told me about that when she got back. Said she nearly sprained her wrist."

"Nearly knocked out some of my teeth, but I guess I deserved it."

Cleo nodded and then straightened to her full height, sized Denman up and delivered a full armed slap to the other side of her face hard enough to knock her back into her chair.

"I guess I deserved that too. Is Rikki going to do that as well?"

"Don't know. Guess you'll have to run into her and find out." Cleo turned on her heel and left without a backwards glance.

"That went well," I commented as I walked back out. "By the way where are the guys?"

"As well as can be expected, and they're out getting supplies while I meet with group reps for our job here. You can help by doing the hull inspection if you feel like being useful."

I finished the last bite of my bagel and drained the last of the coffee from my cup. "I though you were supposed to wait half an hour

after eating before going in the water."

"Doesn't apply to you, but then you're a special case."

I rolled my eyes over dramatically and dove over the side to do a check. I should have checked to see if anyone was watching me before I dove. I found out later that Cleo had been standing at the gate and when I dove in the water fully dressed she'd started counting. Needless to say Cleo and the others weren't going to be happy with me next time we met. Why is only hindsight 20/20? And yes she stayed there, hidden, until I came out of the water too. And you ask why I don't like to get out of bed most mornings?

## 2. Chapter 2: Mako investigation!

Authors Note:

I don't own this it's purely for fun.

Couldn't sleep so I went and wrote the second chapter immediately. Yay for insomnia.

Chapter 2: Mako investigations!

I swam down under the ship, checked the seams, gave the turbines the once over, poked, prodded, and knocked on the hull. Took me a good thirty minutes but I'd been practicing to increase how long I could hold my breath. If Denman's math was right then for every minute I could hold my breath on dry land I could hold it for fifteen as a mermaid. I'd be good for about another ten minutes give or take but I didn't need it to complete my inspection. Everything was in good shape down here.

I swam out to the back of the ship, I think it's called the aft or something, and surfaced. "Everything's clear under the water line. So we should be all set for travel out of the marina."

"That's good. We didn't have time to check last night when we got in. It was almost midnight local time and we all wanted to get to sleep." Denman walked over to me and offered her hand to help pull me out of the water.

"Lovely!" I drawled, heavy on the sarcasm, as I took her pro-offered hand and the help out of the water. "As if I need more jet lag? How many time zone's did we cross this time? Actually never mind I really don't want to know."

Denman just chuckled a bit as she walked back to the work area to get ready for our trip out to Mako that we planned for today. I just shook my head as I pulled myself fully clear of the water then held out my hand fingers curled but palm up this time. I tensed the muscles in my arm as if I was going to lift something and started drying off. It took a while. My powers worked slow. It made precision easy in the small term but made going to the extremes take a bit of time. So it was about a good two minutes for me to get fully dry, ok so it was closer to three, I rounded down. Sue me.

I walked over to the work area and started a fresh pot of coffee. I'm addicted to the stuff and no I don't need an intervention. "So what

do you think we'll find?"

"No idea, really." Denman answered. "With some luck we might find out why that pool in Ireland isn't doing anything anymore. I just need to see it and get a GPS reading."

"If you're right about the locations that is."

"Hence why we're going there. That's why it's called a research trip."

I held up my hands in surrender. When I heard the gate to our privet marina area get kicked open.

"Hey! You sheilas think you can come up here and lend us blokes a hand with all this stuff" I heard a voice I immediately identified as belonging to Aaron, the only native Aussie in our crew. I swear I'd listen to that man read the phone book just for his accent. Uh... Just forget I said that please.

Denman and I hurried up to the top to help carry down a lot of diving gear, none of it for me obviously, as well as some food for lunch, and a box with the underwater motion cameras that we were going to place later in the week. Even with all seven of us it took a few trips to get it all on board and stowed.

"So," Aaron asked me. "What do you think of my home? Nice isn't it?"

"Don't know yet," I answered honestly, "So far all I remember seeing is the inside of my eyelids."

He gave a good natured laugh and told me that the best is yet to come. I just smiled and nodded, I'd been looking forward to this stop in our world hoping research trip since we agreed to take the survey job. Especially after our last stop in Ireland two months ago on a full moon when nothing happened. Literally nothing. No glow in the pool, no bubbles, no nothing. It had been the first full moon since the comet was supposed to have passed near earth. Denman though there was a connection, hence our planned trip to the Mako pool.

We'd just needed a good reason for her to come back here. When several local and international organizations needed someone to see if the local marine life and fish lanes were returning to their normal locations we'd jumped on the opportunity.

"Ok, we've got everything we need for today so let's head out. We can pick up the scanners and sonars later. Kenichi take us out to Mako." Denman began giving orders. "The rest of you start doing safety checks on your dive gear. Laura take the map up to the helm so Kenichi can get us moving."

"Oh, and here I was about to offer to race him there." I fake gripped as I grabbed the map in question and headed up to where the steering wheel thing was.

Denman just rolled her eyes at me. I couldn't help but laugh, It had taken me the better part of eighteen months but I'd finally managed to impart a sense of humor to her. Go me. I came to a quick stop just before the stairs to the upper level made a quick back track and got

my a fresh cup of coffee. I do have my priorities straight.

I unrolled the map and pointed out the mark Denman had made near the dormant volcano on the island. Ken just nodded at me and stuck his head out for a quick check to see that all lines were clear and then took us out into open water.

"Need me for anything else here?" I asked. He just shook his head and motioned that I was free to head back down if I wanted.

I took him up on the offer, and I needed a fresh coffee anyways. This one hadn't even made it up the stairs with me. Yes I know, I really should cut back, blame Jack he's the one that got me hooked in the first place. I came back down only to find the pot empty and everyone with a full cup next to them while going over their gear. And the worst part, that was the last of the fresh coffee too.

I flopped down on the bench when I was promptly handed a water proof camera and GPS tracker and told to get them ready for the trip into the pool. This in truth consisted more of setting up a wireless sync to the laptop here on the ship then it did anything else. Larry had to talk me through it in a few places but that's why he was here, to keep all our techno gear working right. Once that was done Denman dragged me away for one more quick job. I had to help her into her wet suit. I didn't need one personally, and she was just glad she had another woman on the ship to help her out. Guess why.

By the time all that was done we'd arrived, and Denman gave us the usual safety brief. Stay in pairs, don't stray too far, so on and so forth. I mostly didn't listen. Other then the stay near the team part, none of it really applied to me as I don't use dive gear.

"Alright let's get in the water and follow my lead I've been here before so I know what I'm looking for and where I'm going. That goes for you to Laura." Denman gave me a knowing look. I deserved it too, I tended to wander off when on a dive if I saw something interesting to look at, or a dolphin. They loved to play.

We hit the water and Denman led the way. I mentally groaned. All the gear made them swim so slow. I know I should show some patience but that's kinda hard to keep in mind when you can out swim most water craft, without trying hard! But I did it and we got to the cave in about twenty minutes only to find that the entrance was partially blocked by a minor cave in. I could fit in but the others would either have to clear some rocks or leave the air tanks behind.

We ended up moving rocks. Oh. Joy.

When we finally did get in the place looked like a war zone. "I'm gonna go out on a limb and bet you 50 bucks American that this didn't look like this last time you were here." I was looking at Denman as I made this offer.

"Do I look like a sucker to you?" was her answer.

I just laughed. So did the guys, none of whom would take my bet either, not that I honestly expected them to, and we go to work. Denman pulled out the GPS and took a reading on the location, I started taking pictures and sending them to the lap top back on the

ship. Aaron, Jack, and Alan began looking over the wall to try and assess the extent of the damage and figure out what caused this. We all left everything alone on Denman's instruction beyond that, she didn't want anyone to know we'd been here beyond the rocks we'd moved to enter.

"Ok. I've got a good grid reading here. What's your take on what happened here?" Denman queried us.

"Looks like an explosion boss," Alan said. "Looks like it was well done too."

"So you think this was intentional?" Aaron asked.

"I think he's right," Jack said from over by the wall. "And judging from the spread I'd say this was the point of origination right here."

"So someone came in here and blew this place sky high and shut the whole thing down you mean?" I asked from in the water.

"Basically, yeah!" Alan nodded.

"Well if I'm right," Denman began. "Then the pools are linked like the two poles of a magnet. You have to have both a north and a south pole for it to work. Destroy one and you've got just a lump of metal with no polarity. If the grid reading match up the way I think they do then when this place got damaged and rendered inactive so did the other pool."

"So if the pools don't work how do we get more mermaids?" I asked dreading the answer.

Denman didn't disappoint. "You have kids."

"Whoa, I'm only nineteen here little young to be thinking of that. Besides I don't even have a boyfriend yet!"

I was answered by a general chorus of laughter.

"Well I've gotten all I need from here let's head back."

Once we got back on the ship Denman went straight for the laptop and started checking the two grids. Soon as I was dry I joined her and started to dry her off while watching her run the figures. The answer confirmed what we both feared. The pools were almost on a perfect opposite to each other. They were linked much like the poles of the magnet Denman had used as a metaphor earlier. When the pool here on Mako had been damaged beyond it's ability to do what ever it did it had shut down the pool in Ireland too. Unless what ever powered the pools could self repair, and we had no way to observe if that was possible, I had just become the last mermaid in the world. If the race of mermaids was to survive it all fell to me. No pressure right? How little I knew then.

### 3. Chapter 3: Flipside 1

Authors Note:



I don't own anything except my OC. This is all just for fun.

This will be the first of what I plan to call Flipside chapters. So called because they will purely concern plot elements that happen when my main character Laura is elsewhere and also only when doing a flashback or verbal conversation recap would be a total hassle to lay out to cover necessary plot points. Hopefully there won't be too many of these in the story. Well here goes. Hope you enjoy.

### Chapter 3:

#### Flipside 1: Mermaid meeting

Cleo hurried away from the marina, typing out a text to be mass sent to the others as she went. The message was short and to the point: Meeting at my house as soon as you can arrive! She closed her phone and quickened her pace to a steady run.

She arrived shortly before the others did and quickly opened the door and led them inside.

"What's going on that was so important we had to rush over here?" Rikki demanded before the door was even closed.

"Not here," Cleo answered. "Upstairs. I'll explain everything. You won't believe this."

"Are you sure it's safe to talk here?" Emma, ever the practical one, asked.

"Yeah. Dad and Sam are both at work and Kim's visiting a friend all day. We have the place to ourselves." Cleo reassured her, and quickly lead the way upstairs.

"This should be interesting," Bella mumbled mostly to herself as she followed everyone.

Once up in Cleo's room everyone got comfortable and Cleo made her announcement. "Denman is back!"

Everyone just sat there stunned for a short moment then they all burst out questions at the same time.

"WHAT!" from Emma.

"Please tell me this is some kind of bad joke!" from Rikki

"Uh? Who's Denman?" Bella asked

The three of them looked at her confused for a moment before remembering they hadn't filled her in on that mostly because they never expected Denman to return. They quickly filled her in on all the details of their capture and the ruse they'd used to convince Denman they'd given it all up.

"And now she's back? So what do we do?" Bella asked once they finished explaining.

"Well for one thing we're grounded." Emma replied. "No going in the water until after she leaves we can't let her find out it was all a

trick.'

"Well that's the only bit of good news," Cleo said. "She still thinks it was permanent. So she has no reason to come after us."

"Well that's at least something good." Rikki commented in relief. "But that means you're in the most danger Bella. She didn't know about you then and there won't be another eclipse for a long time so you don't have that escape if things go wrong."

"Yeah, I get that." Bella didn't seem too thrilled by that bit of news. "What's she here for this time anyways?"

"She's here to see if all the marine life and the fishing lanes have gone back to where they were at before the comet came." Cleo answered.

"That means underwater cameras again I'll bet." Emma stated. "I'm just saying you know."

"No you're right. There will be cameras just like last time." Rikki moaned. "At least this time we know about them before hand."

"Guy's. There's more." Cleo's voice sounded very depressed.

"What could be worse than Denman being here?" Rikki asked.

"Well she kinda has a new assistant with her." Cleo started. "She's about our age, and isn't worried about diving into the water fully dressed."

She looked at each of the others as she said that. "You don't suspect, well, that? Do you?" Rikki asked.

"Well it did seem odd so I started counting how long she stayed underwater. I lost count at half an hour."

"She could have had an air tank," Emma didn't sound too convincing though.

"I thought of that so I waited for her to get out of the water, just to be sure." Cleo gave Rikki a very direct look. "And I watcher her dry off too."

Rikki just returned the stare not getting it at first then her eyebrows shot up as it clicked. "No! I will not share a power with a sell out. Not after the last time!"

"It took her almost three minutes to dry off so I don't think she's as strong as you are if that helps any."

"No! Not in the slightest. Seriously guys, what are we going to do? We can't let Denman keep her!"

"I think she was there willingly."

"Why would she be willing to do that?" Emma interjected

"I don't know. I didn't think it would have been a good idea to run over and ask right then." Cleo answered.

"No I supposed not." Bella spoke up. "But Emma does have a point there. We need to find out why she's with this Denman. For all we know she might be being forced to stay. We'll have to find a way to talk to her alone."

"You mean we will," Rikki replied. "They don't know about you and I think we'd all agree it's better to keep it that way."

Bella just nodded her agreement. She didn't like being left out of stuff with the girls but this time she'd make an exception. Better to play it safe.

The girls started discussing various plans. It took them the rest of the morning. In the end they'd decided to go with confronting her about why she'd sell out when they'd given up everything to keep their freedom. Bella would stay near but separate with Will, Ash, and even Zane in case they needed back up. They'd just have to wait for a good opportunity to present itself. They then left. Emma, Bella, and Cleo each left to go to work. Rikki got asked to let Will know what was going on and to ask if he'd lend a hand when the time came.

They wouldn't get a chance until that weekend, and like most things unexpected, it would leave them with more questions than answers.

#### 4. Chapter 4: Caught

Authors Note:

I just do this for fun that should be obvious by now.

This chapter took a bit to figure out how it should go when I was brain storming ideas for it, but you'll be happy to know I figured it out and am now ready to go. Enjoy.

#### Chapter 4: Caught Hook, Line, and Sinker

My week went slowly. We never did get to placing the cameras due to several of the reps we needed to meet with ended up unable to meet till later in the week. Thus I got to sit around and do some work, homework to be precise. Part of the deal I had with Denman made me her apprentice and she took her teaching duty's seriously as any other teacher I'd ever had, in short she buried me alive in text books. She even had me write an essay.

So when the weekend finally rolled around and she cut us all loose for some R&R, I actually woke up before everyone else did. Scary I know. We all scattered across the town, except for Aaron who headed up the coast to visit his family while he had the opportunity to do so, I wished him well while feeling a bit envious of him for having the opportunity. So I did the next best thing, I went shopping. I found a lot of nice clothes to fit the weather here, which was just a bit warmer then our last stop, and I got myself one of those coffee brewers that has a timer on it. Hey, I needed a good alarm clock, ya know!

I tried out a few nice places to eat and noted one little cafe by the canal I saved out for lunch on Sunday. I should have avoided it like

it was carrying the plague. I walked right in, and got caught. I never even saw the hook one could say.

It was a pleasant looking place named Rikki's. You'd think that would have been my first clue except I didn't know at the time that was how her name was spelled. Hey, in my defense there are a lot of ways to spell that particular name how was I supposed to know. Anyways I walked right in just after the lunch rush so the crowd was starting to thin out a bit. There was a live band rehearsing on a stage, they sounded pretty good. I made a mental note to return for the real performance if I ever had the chance to.

I had no sooner found a seat in a booth near the back when a waitress came up to me. She had blond hair, neatly tied back, a welcoming smile, and an air of someone that took her job very seriously.

"Hello, I'm Emma," I choked on nothing. "How can I help you today?"

Ok calm down, I told myself. Just cause her name is Emma doesn't mean she's That Emma. Hey I only found out about the run in with Emma when Denman got back to our room that day. I hadn't been there to witness or I'm sure I'd have recognized her sooner. Like I said I walked into this trap, despite numerous warnings I should have seen a mile away, or would that be kilometer here, either way I had no one to blame but myself for this fiasco.

"Hello." My voice did not squeak, honest that wasn't me. Oh who am I kidding I squeaked like a cornered mouse. I cleared my throat and tried again,

"Sorry about that." I got out in a more normal tone. "I'll have chicken salad sandwich and a chocolate shake, please."

"Sure thing. I'll have that for you in just a moment."

"Thank you." I figured being polite might just save me. It was also a good thing that Emma didn't recognize me either.

Now let me make this clear, at this point I didn't know I'd been found out. I was more worried about being collateral due to being Denman's assistant. If I had known they'd found out about me, I'd have been out that door the second Emma had turned her back. As it was I just sat there and hoped no one walked in that would realize I was with Denman and tip off Emma.

I should know better then to tempt fate by now. I had no sooner thought that then two more girls walked in. I'd have normally glanced and then dismissed them as just regular customers, like most people would, except one of the two girls was Cleo. I flipped my hair over to the side and tried to use it to hide my face. I'd forgotten to take into account the fact that hair as long as mine, it was down to my waist, and the color of mine, a mix of dark brown and bright red that I never could quite put a name too, would be rather distinctive on it's own. So when Cleo made a quick glance around she easily figured out it was me in a second.

I was so busy trying to avoid her notice that I never realized she had noticed. Not until until Cleo and Emma sat down in front of me

with a third girl with blond hair that I guessed had to be Rikki by simple process of elimination. Turns out I was dead on. Emma had brought my order with her, plus a glass of water which she slowly started sliding across the table towards me.

"So we can do this the easy way," the third girl I was guessing was Rikki said. "Or we can do this the real easy way." She pointed at the glass of water and Emma slid it closer to the edge.

You know that second where time seems to stop, your brain kinda blue screens, and all you can think of to describe the situation are the words Oh and Shit. Well that was me right now.

"Hey, hey, easy now," I burst out in a horse whisper. "Let's not do anything rash here."

"A little late for that now after what I saw you do." Cleo stated with steady glare at me.

Well that explained the water. And for the record if I thought for a second I could get out the door and down to the water in less than ten seconds I'd have made a try for it. As it was, I knew I wasn't that fast on land, and I was well and truly snared.

"Ok, ok, ok. You got me. Just tell me how you found out and I'll do my best to answer your questions," I figured I'd try to negotiate

Cleo didn't waste any time and just laid it all out right up front. "Fair enough, I saw you dive into the water fully dressed, stay underwater for half an hour, and just to make completely sure I waited for you to get out of the water too. That good enough?"

"You know most people would have just thought me a bit odd for the first one and kept on going." I countered.

"Yeah. Well we're not most people." Emma had me there.

"We kinda look at that sorta stuff just a tad differently. I'm sure you can figure out why." Rikki practically drowned me in the sarcasm

'Ok, you have a point there," I admitted. "So what is it you want to know. I don't think for a second all three of you would confront me like this unless you wanted to know something."

"We want to know why? That simple enough?" Emma was half leaning over the table towards me.

"Ok. Why what? That covers a lot of things you know." I was trying to buy myself some time to think of a way out of this. I should have saved myself the effort.

"Why would you sell out to Denman, especially after all we went through to stay out of her hands." Rikki explained.

At this point I realized I was better off just answering them. I wasn't going to get out of this any other way that I could think of. And if I had to be honest about it they did deserve an answer to that one.

"Ok. I'll tell you. I just hope you don't mind if I eat while I do," I picked up the glass of water and put it down on the next table over. "And let's just make sure there are no accidents. You might not have to worry anymore but I can't say the same."

"I guess that's fair." Cleo answered.

"Ok good." I took a bite of my sandwich while I thought about the best place to begin. "Ok let me ask you all this, have you ever been in an accident bad enough that you ended up in a hospital ER?"

I got a bunch of head shakes in the negative. "Well I have. Twice. And you know what the first thing they do when you only have injuries that require a few stitches for?"

I took another bite while they all shook their heads again. "Well the first thing they do is to take hot water and a sponge to clean the injured area before they use something to disinfect it. Now let's think worst case here and you end up there unconscious. How are you supposed to tell them not to use water?"

I continued eating while they thought that over. The looks of horror told me when they understood that possibility.

"But that doesn't explain why you're with Denman." Rikki pointed out.

"I'm getting there. You needed to understand the reason behind it first. See I realized that sometimes things happen that you can't avoid. I'm sure you noticed how often you got water spilled on you," they all nodded at that. "You can deal with water easy enough. Just find somewhere isolated. But there are worse situations to be in. Having been there I knew the only way to be safe was to be accepted for what I was. More so since you three gave it up that leaves me as the only one. If that doesn't qualify me as endangered I don't know what does."

They all gave me an odd look but they nodded their understanding of that.

"But you could just give it up like we did you know." Cleo said.

"That would have been an option if I had know before I met Denman and if the pools still worked." I pointed out.

"Even the one in Ir... OUCH!" Cleo glared at Rikki and Emma.

I pretended to miss her slip, but made a mental note that it seemed odd that they knew where the other pool was.

"Er... I mean to say there's more then one pool?" She was quick to say.

"Yes." I answered. "And they're linked. When the pool here at Mako was damaged it shut down the other pool as well."

I finished the last of my lunch and then rested my arms on the table. "And that brings us around to Denman. See I wanted to be a marine

biologist after I got out of high school. So when I heard that a famous marine biologist was giving a presentation at an aquarium near where I lived and that she was showing off a rare sample from an unknown source, I just had to go. This was of course after I became a well... you know."

They nodded. "So that's where you met Denman. But how did you end up as her lab rat?" Rikki prompted.

"First off I'm her assistant not her lab rat, and second off I though, at the time, that I could out smart her by slipping her a slide with a second sample from myself." I stated flat out, a little annoyed at the assumption that I was just a lab rat.

"Were you completely stupid or just brain dead to try something idiotic like that?" Rikki demanded

"You'd think that in hindsight, and honestly when I look back I kinda have to agree with you about it. Definitely one of the stupider things I've done in my life."

"You think?" I have to say I didn't expect the sarcasm from Cleo, but she delivered it well.

"If you promise not to interrupt I'll tell you the story," I offered. They nodded their agreement and I started in, my mind drifting back to that day almost a year and a half ago now.

I'd sat through her final presentation of her time here. I'd waited till this one simply so I would be able to slip her my slide with out having to worry about the next group entering the auditorium while I did it. It had be very informative and I had enjoyed it.

Afterward I'd waited till everyone else had filed out and then walked up to the front to where she had her slides of both the type that went in a projector and under a microscope laid out.

"Dr. Denman, I just wanted to say thank you for a very informative presentation, and that it was an honor to be able to be here." I said while holding out my hand for her to shake. In my other hand I was palming the slide I had prepared .

"Thank you." she answered taking me up on the offer of a handshake. "I must say it's nice to see someone so young taking an interest in the field. Do you plan to study it as your major?"

"Yes. I do actually. I've been interested in marine life since before I started high school. So I figured just go with what I loved."

"Well I must say I like your determination. Don't loose it." She picked up some of the papers on the table in front of her and took them over to a carry bag she had sitting on a chair.

I picked up the slide with the rare sample sliding my own behind it as I did so. "Fascinating. This really is an amazing thing you found."

"Put that down," she snapped. "It's irreplaceable"

I quickly put it down with my own slide still behind it. "Sorry. You're right. I should have asked you for permission first. I hope you'll forgive me."

"It's ok," she answered. "No harm done. Sorry I snapped at you."

"No worries you had good reason. Well once again thank you and it really has been an honor." I turned and started to walk out.

I'd only gotten to the third row when I heard Denman behind me ask, "Now if I was to spray you with this water bottle here, I wonder what would happen?"

I should have kept walking and said something like I'd get wet, instead I panicked and spun to face her to see if she was bluffing or not. Turns out she wasn't but then seeing my face was all the answer she had needed. She slowly lowered the bottle she was holding, and let out a long sigh.

I gave a nervous swallow. "You lied didn't you? You know exactly where it's from don't you?"

"Yes. Yes I do." She spoke barely above a whisper.

"So what now?" I asked, ready to run for the nearest exit.

"Now? Nothing. That's what."

"You're just going to let me walk out of here? I don't believe that? Give me one good reason why." I demanded of her.

"Because I won't make the same mistake of thinking that you and others like you are just wild animals incapable of rational thought twice. Once is enough." She answered slumping down into a chair. "Last time the one's I had found showed me that they could make the hard choice to give up all off it, something an animal that runs on just instinct wouldn't do. So I've had to live knowing that I had treated three young girls as if they were something rather than someone, and also that because of that I'd caused the extinction of a species. I'm supposed to work to preserve them not eradicate them."

I relaxed. "So I can just walk out of here? You really won't stop me?"

"That's right. I won't stop you."

I was half way out when she called out to me to wait. I turned around about to challenge her on her statement of not stopping me, but all she was doing was holding out a card. "I won't lie. I would love to do research on you, but this time I'll do it right and ask first. Here's a number where I can be reached if you decide to take me up on the offer. Please I ask only that you think about it."

I went back and took the card. "I'll think about it, but if I do accept you have to promise me you'll tell me the full story."

"That sounds completely fair."

As I finished my mind came back to the present. "I went home and



talked to my parents about it. A few months later when I turned eighteen I made up my mind. My Dad is a lawyer, he's no big shot but he does well enough. He studied international law hoping it would boost his career, it was useful when he drafted a contract for Denman to sign that would be valid anywhere in the world. She agreed to the terms, we both signed it, with my Dad as witness, and here we are now."

They were completely silent. Their expressions were completely stunned as they processed what I'd told them.

"So. She really meant it when she apologized to me then." Cleo's voice sounded as stunned as she looked.

"You told your parents?" Rikki asked.

"Yeah. They took it well." I answered. "And yes, Cleo, she really did."

"And here I thought she was just another heartless researcher interested only in picking us apart for what ever fame she could get." Emma said.

"Yes, well, part of what got through to her was when you said that to her face. Oh, and when you told her 'there's nothing here for you now' the phrasing of using 'nothing' instead of 'no one' really drove the point home."

The girls just sat back. Their expressions turning thoughtful.

"So where did you change?" Cleo asked.

"That Cleo," I answered. "Is a story for another day. It's starting to get dark and if I don't get back before the tide I'll have to swim out to our ship. We'll be placing cameras tomorrow in the fishing lanes and we have to be done before they start their runs. We don't feel like being the catch of the day you know."

The girls shared a laugh with me on that.

"Well I hope we can talk some more. That is unless I'm not allowed here."

"No, you can come here. We won't ambush you again. I guess your reasons are something we never thought of." Rikki quickly offered. "I guess we can't blame you for thinking in the long term. It's something I guess we should have done ourselves."

"Thank you, now if you'll excuse me I really need to hurry." I dropped some money to cover my order and a tip and hurried out the door. Turns out I didn't make it in time. Oh well I do love to swim.

## 5. Chapter 5: Revelations

Authors Note:

I still don't own this. It's all for fun.

I'm glad to see how many of you out there are reading this. That tells me that I'm doing good so far. You wouldn't be reading if you weren't enjoying is the outlook I'm choosing to go by. So many thanks to you all.

## Chapter 5: Revelations

I took my time getting back to the ship. I was in a good mood. I felt I might have made some progress in making peace between the former mermaids and Denman. I kind of let it go to my head.

When I finally got to the ship I found that Denman had just finished packing the last of the supplies for the next morning and was heading off to get some sleep. The tide came in between 8am and 9am, and we wanted to be done long before the fishing boats left. That's why we were anchored out in the open sea tonight, we wouldn't have to wait on the tide and could leave early. So as soon as I got dry I fully planned to go to sleep as well.

The guys were in the middle of a game of poker. They tried to convince me to join them, but I declined. After all last time they'd cleaned me out in less then twenty minutes. I'm not very good with cards. I'd tried to make it back by challenging them to a water race, even offered to let them use a speed boat, but considering how fast I could swim they turned me down.

As I headed into the cabin I shared with Denman, I swiped the bag of coffee grounds. I'd set up my new coffee pot/alarm clock yesterday and anchored it in place by the simple expedient of using duct tape to hold it to the wall. I got it all set up to auto brew at 5am and tried to get some sleep. Surprisingly, despite how jived I was from the meeting today, I fell asleep almost immediately.

My new alarm clock worked like a charm. By five minutes after the set time the coffee had finished and the aroma had woken me up. I pulled a cup out of the drawer and poured myself a cup. I looked over to offer Denman a cup as well, to be polite, only to notice she'd already been up and out of the room for a while. She's something of a morning person, and I just don't understand how they can do it. She doesn't even drink coffee.

By my second cup I was awake enough to get dressed in a swim suit, we were going to spend almost the entire day in the water, and head out on deck. I found the guys, except Ken, still playing cards. Ken was up in the bridge getting things ready to head out to our first stop of the day.

"Did you guys even bother to go to sleep at all?" I asked as I sipped at my third cup of coffee for the morning. My record was five and given the early hour I was thinking I might set a new one today.

"Nah!" Aaron answered me. "We can sleep after our first job is done since we don't have to do the second one till late afternoon. Besides I'm winning and these suckers think they have still have a chance to win it back before we get to our first stop. Almost makes me feel guilty."

"Your luck has to run out sooner or later." Jack told him.

"Yeah, maybe. But not today," Aaron said with a hearty laugh.

"Men!" I muttered as I headed over to where Denman was getting her gear ready. "I swear, I'll never understand them."

Denman heard me and snickered a bit. I guess its one of those universal things we both understand and share a view on.

"All right boy's. Last hand." She called out. "You need to start your pre-dive gear check and get suited up. Come on now."

The guys all groaned but seeing as Denman was technically their boss they had no choice but to pack up the cards and get started. I did my part by helping Larry, who as the tech guy was staying on the ship with the computers to coordinate our efforts, get everything set up and linked in to the system. This consisted of sound checking the underwater ear pieces that he could talk to us on, and the text key pads that strapped around our left wrist that we could use to send messages back to him with. Both my ideas actually. They worked like a charm for jobs like this. The last piece of gear each of us had was a sonar beacon so he could track us each individually and call out directions if we started to go out of the designated grid area.

We'd just finished up when we arrived at the first of three grids we were placing cameras in. Denman and the guys would be handling this one. I was responsible for the other two. Mostly because I could get to them and be done by the time they all finished, got back on the ship, and drove the boat over to the third area to pick me up. If I hadn't been part of the team they'd have had to have been out her two hours earlier to ensure they would have plenty of time to clear the area before the fishing boats arrived.

"OK. Listen up everyone." Denman called us to the table where she had a large sea map of the area spread out.

We shuffled over and Larry pulled up a matching map on the laptop he was working on. As Denman pointed out the area's of the grids we'd be working in he outlined them on the computer map that he'd set up to display our beacon markers on. I had to give it to him, the man knew his stuff and he did it well. Once the briefing was done I helped Denman suit up back in our cabin and then got in the water. Once that was done they started handing me my gear. If I'd put it on before it would go along with my clothes to where ever they go to, we still haven't figured that one out yet.

I had a slightly different ear piece then everyone else. Mine had four clips that were painfully tight on my ear to hold it in place. Anything less and it would be ripped off when I swam at high speeds. Even this barely worked but we'd yet to find anything better, so I just dealt with it.

"Go on ahead of us," Denman instructed me. "You have the most area to cover so a head start won't hurt."

I nodded and took off. With only a few course corrections from Larry I got to my first area and started setting out cameras. I had just finished that one when he called out that the others were just finishing up and they were going to head to the pick up point. I sent him a message that I'd finished this area and would be heading over there right on schedule. Everything came out just right. I was

placing the last camera just as they arrived, and soon as I finished I headed up to the ship.

Once stripped of all my gear I got dried off. We all congratulated each other on a job well done and then the guys headed to bed. Ken drove us over to our next area and then flopped down in the hammock he'd rigged up in the bridge area.

It was a few hours later when Denman finally decided to ask what had had me in such a good mood since I'd gotten back last night. So I filled her in on everything that had happened the day before with the girls and how I hoped it would help them come around.

"So you think they'll maybe forgive me now I take it?" She asked.

"Hopefully. At least I gave them a different view of everything."

"Forgive me for this but let me ask you, from a purely empirical view point, how do you plan to prove your story is true to them. After all you made quite sure we were alone when it happened."

I looked at her for a second before attempting to answer. "Well I could... er. No. Maybe I could just... um. Ah damn it I didn't think of that!"

"Right. So that means the only way you can prove it is for them to ask me about it, and let's face it they don't like me and I can't say I blame them."

Awe damn it. I really hadn't thought about how to prove it to them. And Denman was right it was going to be my word against their experiences with her. I was going to need more than a good story.

"Oh man. Here I was hoping I had maybe started to build a bridge that might lead to them forgiving you, and instead it now looks more like I threw a 5 gallon can of gas onto a bonfire This is highly likely to back lash on me. I need some time to think." I headed to the back of the ship to go for a swim.

"No problem," Denman called knowing I needed to have some space to figure this out. "Take what time you need. I'll be here going over the images we're already getting from our mornings work."

I nodded my thanks and dove in. I swam in a large lazy circle around the ship. I didn't need to swim fast or go far I just needed to swim in such a way that it was as automatic as if I was pacing. The motion freed my mind to look at the mess I'd most likely made.

I kept working it from different views. Realizing as I did how it would have seemed to them. With what they had personally had happen to them I realized that it would seem very far fetched and rather hard to swallow. They'd need more than just my word on it but Denman had been right. The only one that could prove it was not just a story was the one person they didn't trust in the slightest.

After almost an hour I realized my thoughts were going in as much of a circle as I was swimming in so I just gave up and headed back to

the ship. I was more than a bit annoyed and frustrated with myself so when I went to get out of the water I came up too quickly and found myself so far out of the water that when I hit the boat I'd completely emerged.

Denman rushed over to me. "What the heck did you just do?"

"I'm not quite sure but I think I just jumped completely out of the water, you know like a dolphin does." I replied.

"You can do that?"

"I think so. Get the camera ready I'm going to try something. I'll be on the starboard side."

She nodded and quickly got the camera ready. I swam down about fifty meters and off to the side far enough that I was sure I wouldn't hit the ship even on accident. I made a quick loop to build up some momentum and then darted straight up towards the surface. I wasn't going full out but I wasn't sand bagging it either. I burst from the water with the grace of a dolphin, it was a total rush. When I hit the peak of my jump I threw my arms out behind me and arched my back going in to a curve as graceful as any gymnast. I got a good look down and saw that I had to have cleared the top of our twenty to twenty-five foot high ship by at least ten to fifteen feet. And then I fell back towards the water with all the grace of a falling brick.

It hurt. A lot!

I swam back to the ship, and pulled my self out carefully. I'd tried to land in a proper dive and I could see the bruises on my wrists from it. I'd need some practice on that before I ever tried this again.

"That was amazing. The height you got. Had to be about a good ten meters or so. Can you do that again. I want to get more recordings of it."

"No thanks." I held up my wrists. "I'll need to learn how to land those first before we do this again."

"OK. So just don't go as high. I need more data to work with. This isn't something I though of testing for before."

"Another time. That landing really hurt."

"You'll be OK. I couldn't be that bad..."

"LINDA!" I finally snapped. I don't use her first name often, so when I do it usually get's her attention.

She slowly put the camera down on the table and leaned over it. "I was pushing too hard again wasn't I?"

"Just a bit."

"Damn it!" she slammed the table with her hands. "I should know better. I should be better."

I open my mouth to speak but she stops me with a wave of her hand. "Don't say its OK. Don't tell me its all right. I should know when I'm about to cross a line I shouldn't cross.." She puts her hands back on the table and starts to sink into herself.

I get clear of the water and start to dry off. I go to speak again, and again she stops me.

"Don't tell me that you don't blame me. You should. This isn't the first time you've had to remind me about my promise to never cross those lines again. To throw both my personal and professional ethics out the window and sell everything I value for the sake of the goal. I should be able to stop myself. I should be better than this." She sighs heavily, disappointed in herself and then turns and walks into the cabin.

I let her go. Dry now I turn out and face the water, and I try to understand why she takes it so hard when she get's a bit caught up in the research. I don't blame her. She's always held to the agreement that of my giving informed willing consent. But she is right, this wasn't the first time I'd said no for a good reason.

I mean it's not like it was a point of... It hits me, like a ton of bricks it hit's me. Pride. She had taken great pride in her career, in the ethics and values both personal and professional that went with it, and a promise to never cross the lines she'd set for herself. And then she'd found mermaids, and had crossed every line and tossed all the ethics to the side to catch them and do the research.

And then they'd given it all up in trade for their freedom, leaving her holding a handful of ashes and broken promises. It had broken her spirit. To stand there as they walked out of the cave that day, knowing that everything she'd thought held value to her she'd willing cast aside with out any hesitation. In compromising all her values she'd given up her pride as a marine biologist.

She'd taken what was left and was refusing to let go. And when she'd met me, she'd had to let me go to not compromise her values again. But it would have destroyed her. So she'd made a compromise with herself, she asked me, leaving it completely up to me, if I'd work with her. She didn't even try to 'sweeten' the deal, would accept any conditions I would make, and would wait knowing she might never hear back from me. It must have been torture.

In that moment I realized that Denman, the girls, and myself had all sold something important for something we wanted. The girls had sold their lives as mermaids for their freedom. I had sold my freedom in the short term for the chance that I would have it in the long term. They had been right. I was a lab rat, part of the time, and a willing one too.

And as for Denman, she would have to accept that she was only human. She would make mistakes. She would sometimes go to far. She would have to make amends sometimes. And I had a feeling it would cost her what was left of her pride, and she didn't know what would be left after wards.

I suddenly didn't know which of the three of us, the girls, Denman, or myself, would have ended up paying the highest price. Suddenly I

felt cold and I shivered despite the warmth of the day as I realized I wasn't sure I wanted to know the answer to that question.

## 6. Chapter 6: Secrets Revealed

Author Notes:

Again I don't own this, but I sure am having fun.

A big hello to all my readers. I'm glad you've been enjoying the story so far. If you ever have a question about something that has already happened that I was a little unclear on you can always feel free to ask. If it is something that I had meant to fully explain then I have no problem putting something here in the note to clarify it for you. If it is something I meant to only hint at then I'll just let you know to wait and see how it all comes out.

After all I don't want to leave you all guessing about something that I'd meant to make clear. Hopefully that hasn't happened yet but we still have a ways to go in this adventure and since I'm only human I might futz up once in a while. If I do feel free to politely let me know.

And now on with the adventure.

### Chapter 6: Secrets Revealed

We'd set out the rest of the underwater cameras that afternoon. Denman and I came to a silent agreement to not talk about what went on earlier that day, and things pretty much settled into a routine. Every day we'd check what the cameras had taken pictures of, as well as the current power charge of each camera, and if any were below half a charge I got to swim out and switch them out with one of the spares. When not doing that I was nose deep in text books.

This held for three weeks straight, during which time I never went on shore. I didn't even leave to visit a cafe or a more large chain restaurant. When I got bored of what we had on the ship I'd go and grab a fish or two on my way back from camera swaps.

No matter who offered to go with me I always politely declined. It was after the third week when we had finally collected enough data to determine a solid trend that Denman finally decided to confront me.

"You know it wouldn't kill you to go on shore once in a while."

"You sure about that?" I asked not looking up from my text book.

She sat down next to me and tried a different approach. "I've never seen you study this much in all the time you've traveled with me. Yes you are fine about doing the assignments I give you but you usually don't go this far out of your way to do extra. If I didn't know any better I'd think you were avoiding something, or is it someone? Possibly several someones?"

I froze, but not in panic. I just didn't know what to say to that. She'd hit right on it in one try.

"So I'm right." She said.

"I don't know what you mean." I tried, but I didn't even sound convincing to myself.

She just waited. She didn't glare or do anything to imply I should hurry up. She didn't need to. I didn't hold out long anyways.

"It's just, I don't know what to say to them. I mean, they already think I'm a sell out, now they'll think I'm a liar too, and I just don't know what to say or do to convince them I'm not."

"I don't know." She answered. "But you keep telling me I should go to them and say two seemingly simple words, yet you don't follow your own advice. And here I was thinking you were the brightest student I've ever had too."

"That doesn't mean the advice is bad or that I'm not smart enough to give it, but I'm beginning to see why you find it so hard to actually do it." I finally looked up at her. "Actually being face to face and having to say those words is easy to grasp as a concept, but difficult to put in to practice."

"Yes. It is isn't it. I've been struggling with that for a while now. I can tell you one thing though, the longer you wait the harder it will get to do. Sooner is better. Wish I'd figured that out a long time ago."

"So now you're telling me to go and follow my own advice?" I laughed. "Things sure have taken a turn, haven't they."

"The Doc is right you know." Aaron commented from near the aft of the ship where he was doing a gear inventory. "The longer you wait the harder it gets is very true. I learned that year's ago in a small family spat that just ended up festering. But I can tell you this, if you don't do it then you can't ever get past it and move on, hopefully into forgiveness."

He looked over to us and continued, "It's the hardest with family, cause you know them so well that the hurt you cause runs just that much deeper. That's why you shouldn't let it go too long. I know you don't know those girls that well but they might be the only one's that would ever really understand you. No matter how many test and things we do we'll never be able to relate to what you can do. So you owe it to yourself to go out there and see if you can't mend things and make some new friends."

We just stared at him for a bit. "When did you get so wise?" I asked.

"On that trip home I took. I finally cleared the air with my sister. You don't need to know what it was about, just know that we'd let it go for several years. It wasn't easy but it was definitely worth it. We actually talk again. It's nice to be able to do that."

"I'll try. I guess I won't know unless I do anyways." I closed my books and stored them neatly in one of the storage bins we had. I gave Aaron a hug as I headed out. He'd taken to me almost immediately when he met me, it was nothing romantic or anything like that. I was more like an adopted younger sister to him. At first it had been odd



for me having been an only child, but now I was kind of used to seeing him as a sort of big brother. I was glad to have the chance to feel that kind of family inclusion.

I headed towards Rikki's cafe. I didn't quite get all the way there. The closer I'd go the heavier my feet felt. Until I just couldn't go any farther. I sunk to the ground and stared out at the water. I didn't know if I was looking for a place to escape to or to draw courage from, but I was never given the chance to find out.

"Well, well, well. Look who finally decided to show herself." Rikki's voice sounded from behind me. "Well, got anything to say for yourself?"

"You must hate me."

"No." She dragged the word out. "I mean what possible reason could we have to hate you, well besides you being a liar and a sell out."

"Rikki that's going a bit to far you think." Cleo's voice sounded trying to soften it.

"No. I think it's just right." She answered back.

"I didn't lie." I said trying not to give in and cry. "I just didn't realize that with out some way to prove it that it would seem rather out there from your view."

"Oh ya think!"

"Rikki," Cleo hissed.

"Oh come on you're not going to take her side are you." Rikki demanded.

"I do find her story strange but that doesn't mean we have to be so mean."

"Yeah. Denman said that would be the case. I realized she was right. After all the only one that can say I'm not lying is Denman and we know you have no reason to go and ask her."

"Well that is true," Cleo answered calmly.

"Of course it's true. She has nothing to say to me that I want to hear. She should just pack up and leave. The sooner the better."

I couldn't help it, the tears came and I couldn't stop them.

"I'm sorry," it was barely a whisper. "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean it all to turn out like this. I just didn't think it all the way through first."

Cleo walked around in front of me. She sat down and looked at me.

"Cleo what are you doing." Rikki demanded.

She just glared up at her. "I'm just going to talk to her. See if we

can't get this cleared up a bit. It's all muddled around and that won't get us anywhere."

Rikki came around to stand in front of me. "Fine talk to her, but I think this is all a big waste of time."

Cleo ignored her. "So is there something you wanted to say other than you're sorry?" she asked.

I sniffed and wiped away the tears. Later I'd again marvel that they were the only water that didn't trigger a change, but for now I had other things to focus on.

"I guess I never did answer your question back then. You know the one about why I'm with her." I started. Cleo just nodded at me to continue, Rikki just scoffed and rolled her eyes.

"Well just so you know you were half right, I am a lab rat. You could even say I volunteered for it."

"Well finally you say something true."

"Rikki, not helping," Cleo drawled out.

"So then why did you sell out?" Rikki demanded again.

"You could say I traded my freedom in the short term for the hope, the small hope, of being able to live my life without fear of what someone might do to me if they found out." I sniffed again. "And it's not even a sure thing, it's a total gamble and the risk is ridiculously high."

Rikki winced as that finally broke through her anger. She finally sat down and looked at me.

"I guess you know that was stupid of you. But why Denman in particular?" she asked a bit more calmly.

"Well I guess it's because I wouldn't have bothered with making slide for anyone else, but then again anyone else wouldn't have been able to know what the sample on the slide meant that fast either. So you could say I ended up with Denman cause it wouldn't have worked out any other way." I was still crying, I hated it so much when I cried. I'm not one of those girls that looks good while doing it. Though I honestly think ones that do are as rare as mermaids.

Rikki did a pretty good facepalm and just shook her head.

"You could have ended up in a cage for that stunt you know. In fact, from what we know of our time with her, you should be. The fact that your not is the only thing that makes us even consider your story to be possible." Rikki spoke calmly this time.

"Yeah. I guess you're right." I was, thankfully, starting to wind down on the tears. "I guess that's a little better than nothing I suppose. So what do we do now?"

"Well Emma is supposed to end her shift soon. Why don't you come inside for a bit. Don't worry we'll fill her in and then, well, I guess then we can talk some more. That sound OK with you?" Cleo

offered. I just nodded.

We stood up and headed over to the cafe. I found an open booth in the middle near the door and took a seat. Cleo and Rikki headed over and after grabbing Emma headed into what looked like the back office to fill her in on what I'd told them. I was so down that I never noticed the band's singer slip away and into the office as well. A short bit later Rikki and then Cleo slipped in to the seat across from me.

"Emma is just finishing up and will join us shortly. Did you want to get anything?" Cleo asked me.

"Just some water with a straw," I answered her. She took care of it and we sat down to wait for Emma to arrive, we didn't have to wait long.

"So Cleo and Rikki told me everything. Personally I think you really could have planned it better." Emma said as she sat down.

"Oh, you and planning. Give it a rest once in a while, do something spontaneous." Rikki commented, but you could hear in her voice this was an old argument that had turned into a running joke, plus the silly grins all three of them shared was also a clue.

"So why don't you tell us a little about yourself," Emma suggested.

"OK," I answered. "Anything in particular you'd like to know?"

"How about where you're from and how you became a mermaid," Cleo said.

"I figured you'd want to know that sooner or later," I said with a small chuckle. I was starting to feel a little better. "Well how much so you know about geography in America?"

"Just the basics I guess, why?" Rikki answered for them.

"Well that's where I'm from. America, northern California to be more precise. There's an area there we call the Silicon Valley, there is a reason for it I just never bothered to find out, anyways that's where I call home. The aquarium I told you about is in a city called Monterey, I live about a forty minute drive away from it."

"That's a bit vague." Cleo said.

"Well let me put it this way, if you were visiting me and said the name of the city you lived in here before I'd ever came here it wouldn't mean much to me, but if you said you lived on the Gold Coast in Australia near where the Sea World was I could look on a map and know the general area you're from pretty easily. Make sense?"

They considered that for a moment then agreed it made better sense then the name of a city they had no idea about the location of. A major, easy to find, land mark did make for a good reference point.

"Anyways," I said getting back to answering their questions. "In my senior year in high school the faculty and staff arranged for a trip

to visit various countries in Europe in an attempt to expose us to different cultures. Only those with good marks were allowed to go and we had to get permission from our parents as well. Needless to say I was eligible to go. It was a two week trip and we started in Germany, going through Italy, France, England, and others. We finished in Ireland. All during the trip I earned more leeway then most of my classmates by being more interested in actually learning about the cultures then in indulging in the lower drinking age.

"This allowed me to do some exploring on my own unsupervised. This was allowed only because I always ended up at the local beaches to see if I could find any tide pools or other things of interest, and anyone sent with me tended to get bored with it a lot faster than I did. Eventually it got to the point where I just had to tell them I was going to look for tide pools or other such locations and they just let me go. So while in Ireland I went searching along the cliffs thinking that would be a great place to find some if there was a path down to the base of them. Well I did find one and it led to a cave that I was sure would lead out to base of the cliffs and some great exploring."

"Let me guess," Cleo jumped in. "It was a full moon?"

"Yup. And I found a very nice pool that I mistook for a tide pool. When the moon light hit it, it started to glow, curious that it might be some kind of phosphorescent plant on the side of the pool I reached in and felt the sides, not finding anything I though it might be a reflection on the water so I reached out intending to cause a ripple to see if it distorted the light. I reached to far and lost my balance and fell head long into the water. It's not as warm in Ireland as it is here and that water was really cold so I hurried out and back to where we were staying. I didn't realize what had happened until the next morning when I went to take a bath. I'm sure you know how that worked out for me."

"Oh yeah, we know." They chorused

"Well when I got back home I told my parents. Thankfully they took it well and they did what they could to help me deal with it. The rest you already know."

They nodded at that and I reached out to take another drink of water. I noticed my glass was empty so I held it up and one of the wait staff came by with a new one. Just as she was about to put it down another customer walked in the door with a friend he was talking to. Since he was paying more attention to his conversation then where he was going he ended up walking right in to the waitress and caused her to drop the glass on the table spilling water everywhere.

Before she could even apologize or grab a towel to soak it up I was out of my seat and several feet away, but what surprised me more then anything was that Emma was just as fast as I was and Cleo wasn't far behind her. Unfortunately Rikki had been up next to the wall and the delay of having to wait for Emma and Cleo to move first didn't leave her enough time to get out before the water spilled all over her. Before I could even think to ask why they were so worried about the water any more Rikki had crossed the room to the office and shut the door behind her.

Cleo and Emma stared after her and then looked at me with expressions

that were a mix of guilt and horror. It didn't take me long to put all the pieces together.

"No. You can't mean..." I began to say. They just looked at each other and then down at the floor.

I looked back over to the office door just in time to see the singer for the band knock on the door and be let in. The last of the pieces fell into place in my head as I finally noticed something, the last clue that I had overlooked since my first day here, was that Emma, Cleo, Rikki, and the singer who's name I didn't know yet all wore two different necklaces each, but all were a matched set to the others. The only difference had been that the silver locket the singer had on looked a little less worn out with wear and tear than the others, as if it had been more recently made in an effort to make her feel included.

"So would she be the reason you knew about there being a pool in Ireland before I ever even told you my story?" I asked the two girls in front of me.

Cleo and Emma looked even more guilty, if that was even possible at this point.

"Ummmm... I promise, we can explain everything." Cleo said.

"Oh I can hardly wait to hear this. Shall we?" I held out my arm inviting them to lead the way to the office.

They turned and headed over to the door. By the way they were walking you'd think I was forcing them to walk to their own execution. Oh yes. I could hardly wait to hear this explanation. It had better be real good. Because I had just gone from miserable to just on the edge of pissed off. It wouldn't take much to push me over and I could see they'd figured that out already.

We got to the door and they knocked. "Who is it?" Rikki asked.

"It's us Rikki," Cleo answered. "All of us."

Rikki said a few choice words that I'd assume were what passed for swearing here then told us to come in and be quick about it. Cleo opened the door and we filed in. Rikki was on the floor and there was no mistaking the fact that she had a bright orange tail.

"Hello Rikki." I said. "Something you'd like to tell me? Oh and please introduce me to your other new friend."

Cleo and the singer both slumped down on the couch in the room, Emma leaned against the door to make sure no one else entered, and Rikki just groaned and slumped back to the floor in defeat. Oh yes, this had better be one hell of a good explanation.

## 7. Chapter 7: Explanations

Authors Note:

Don't own this, just having fun with it. And how, hehehehehehe...

We are now getting into the heart of the story. Things are about to start building up to the tidbit I gave you all in the summary. Hold on to your seat's this ride is going to get bumpy from here on out.

## Chapter 7: Explanations

I took a seat on the edge of the coffee table and looked at the four of them. Not one of them could meet my eyes and they all kept looking at the floor.

"Well who would like to start? Any volunteers?" I asked.

"C-c-can I ask you a question first?" Cleo stammered out.

"You can ask, but I don't promise to answer." I replied.

She nodded accepting that and started to ask, "I get how you figured out the three of us but-

"But how did you figure out about me?" the girl next to her finished.

"And you are?" I asked again.

"Bella, you can call me Bella. I already know your name is Laura." She gestured to the other three. "They've kept me filled in on everything."

I nodded at that, it was nothing I hadn't expected once things had clicked into place. I took a moment to think about the question, and decided that I would answer it. It was reasonable and wouldn't hurt me any. Plus it was more or less the same question I'd asked them back when they'd wanted me to explain. They'd answered me then I figured the least I could do now is the same.

"It was a combination of a few things, the first one being when I was answering their questions we ended up talking about the moon pools and Cleo here let slip that they knew about the pool being in Ireland before I'd mentioned it by name. Rikki and Emma did try to stop her but they didn't stop her in time and I noted it." I said.

"I though you had missed that." Emma mumbled.

"No, I just pretended to at the time. I didn't know how it all fit then and I wanted time to think on it first before doing anything about it. I eventually reasoned out that it meant you would have had to have met another mermaid that got changed there, but as I had no idea at the time how to figure out who she might be I kept that to myself."

"So Denman doesn't know about that. Please promise you won't tell her." Rikki was almost begging.

"Well that will depend on you when we get to that point. I'm still making up my mind on that."

They all winced and started thinking about what to tell me. I could practically see the wheels turning in their heads. I continued laying out how I'd put together Bella being the other mermaid from the

Ireland pool while they did that.

"My second 'clue' as it were is when I turned just in time to see her, I mean Bella, be let into this room, but that only meant that she at least knew about you. What clinched it for me was that from the first day we met you've all worn those same necklaces. Like most I noted them in passing but accessories, while important and noted, still aren't something you easily notice as matching set's when spread out over a group of people. For example it's easier to pick out that a necklace matches a bracelet or pair of earrings when all are being worn by the same person, but have three or four people wear a necklace and you tend to just note that they are all wearing one and overlook that they are a set unless you end up having a reason to consider that possibility."

"Oh. I see." Cleo said. "But how did you know Bella was wearing them as well?"

"I saw her that first day when she was here doing a rehearsal. I noted it then but at the time it was just like noticing what someone was wearing. You see it but you don't really worry about it enough to remember it down the road unless you have a reason to. Besides I'm not a fashionista so I don't spend my days comparing what people are wearing like some air heads I've known."

The girls all nodded at that. Then Emma cleared her throat and spoke.

"Well I guess I'll start. We found out about the lunar eclipse from a friend. This friend told us it would draw away our powers. We jumped to the conclusion that it would be permanent, and our friend knew we would do that and didn't correct that assumption."

"This friend wouldn't happen to be named Lewis?" I asked.

"How did you..." Cleo began before realizing she'd just given it away.

"Denman told me what happened. She guessed that Lewis would have been the one that could have had the time and the opportunity to do enough research to learn about the full moons. Still it was only a guess until just now." I smiled at Cleo. She groaned and hid her face in her hands.

"Cleo!" Rikki and Emma said. They didn't sound pleased.

"I'm sorry guys. It just slipped out."

"Well stop letting things just slip out, it's not helping." Rikki scolded her.

"Anyways," Emma continued. "We found out the next morning it was only temporary. We weren't that happy with Lewis for keeping that from us, but he said that if we believed it was permanent then we'd be more convincing when at the pool when Denman showed up."

"Given all we'd gone through to get out of the cage she was trying to put us in I'm sure you understand why we wouldn't have gone running off to her the next morning to say 'sorry it was just a trick'." Rikki said. "Do you mind if I get dried off now?"

"Not at all. I'm surprised you haven't done it already." I answered.

Rikki held her hand out over her tail and slowly made a fist. Steam started rising off her immediately and I couldn't help but feel a little stab of jealousy about how much faster her power worked. She was fully dry in less than half a minute.

"That would have taken me almost three minutes to do. It's not fair that my powers are so weak." I accidentally said out loud.

Bella jumped on that immediately. "Powers? How many do you have?"

"Ah damn it," I felt sheepish. Now I was letting things slip that I should be keeping to myself.

"See I'm not the only one that slips up." Cleo said. Gloating didn't sound right coming from her in my opinion, but she had me dead to rights on slipping up.

"I have four or five I think." I answered.

"You think you have four or five? What are they that it makes you unsure of the count?" Bella asked.

"It's Charlotte all over again!" Rikki complained while taking a seat next to Cleo.

Rikki, Cleo, and Emma all cringed at that thought, Bella and I just ended up asking who Charlotte was at the same time.

"We'll tell you later Bella, but that's not something she needs to know." Rikki snapped.

"Whatever!" I said. "Anyways I can heat and cool water, move around small amounts of it, and if I focus for about half a minute or so it turns into a sort of jelly."

"Can you harden it?" Bella asked me.

"Don't know, never though to try. Is that your power?"

"Yes, but why did you say heat and cool water. Don't you mean boil and freeze?"

"Oh I can do that it just isn't instant like Emma and Rikki. It takes me a while to get up to it, thus I would say heating and cooling is more accurate."

"You can't pull more water out of a cup?" Cleo asked. "I do that, don't know where the extra water comes from, but that's my power."

"No I can't do that. I can barely move the amount of water in a normal sized drinking cup." I sighed. "It seems I have all the same powers as you do but at a far weaker level. I also can't focus more than two at a time since it involves a hand gesture."



"And you consider that a problem?" Emma asked.

"Well I'm betting that my using two powers at once still won't measure up against all four of you working together, especially since my powers are weaker than yours to begin with." I pointed out.

"You said you might have a fifth power. What's it do?" Bella asked.

"I have no idea. I can feel it when I use it, but it just doesn't seem to actually do anything at all." I answered.

"We've gotten off track here. The real worry is are you going to tell Denman or not." Emma said.

"And if I say I will what would you do to stop me?" I stared at each one in turn. "Lock me in a cage or confine me in some other way?"

They all winced and looked at the floor. I could see that they realized the truth behind my question. To stop me they'd have to do to me what had been done to them and I could clearly see that the idea didn't sit well with them.

"I don't know." Cleo said. "I guess we can't actually stop you from doing it, but please, please, please don't."

"Don't worry. You passed. I won't tell her."

"Wait!" Rikki shot to her feet. "You were testing us?"

"Of course. If you would be willing to do to me what had been done to you then I'd know I couldn't trust you, and I would therefore have no choice but to do whatever I needed to do to protect myself up to telling Denman about you if it was necessary."

"I see your point in that," Emma said. "I guess if I was in your shoes I'd have tested us too."

"I will keep your secret, even about Bella, until you decide to tell her yourself..."

"Fat chance, won't happen in this life time," Rikki blurted out.

"As I was saying," I continued. "Unless you decide the situation has changed and choose to tell her yourselves I swear to you all I won't be the one to tell her. In part because you proved to me just now I can trust you to do the right thing even if you would be in danger from it, and because I can't blame you for not telling her it was all a trick. To put it like you did Emma, had I been in your shoes at that time I'd have probably done the same thing you did. So I'm not going to be a hypocrite and turn you in for it."

"I guess we have no choice but to trust you. Not much we can do about it anyways if you changed your mind." Rikki muttered while returning to her seat.

"Don't worry. I'm not lying." I told them. "Well I do have one last question. This one is a bit more of a curiosity so if you don't want to answer I'll understand. The necklaces, what do they mean for you

and why is Bella's locket necklace look newer than the rest of yours do?"

"Oh that's easy, I'll answer that one." Emma said. "My family dragged me on a world trip for a year it ended about a month and a half before you arrived here. During my trip Rikki and Cleo kept me updated on everything that happened here. How they met Bella, how they asked her to join them, and everything else that happened over that year. They even checked with me to see if I was OK with them having Bella join them and even let me know when they got their moonstone necklaces made.

"Well after everything that happened I felt Bella had earned a place among us and wanted to do something to make her feel like she was a part of the group in her own right and not just filling in for me while I was away. So I got in touch with Lewis and asked him if he still knew how to get in touch with the man that had originally made our lockets and see if he would be willing to make a new one for Bella. Lewis was able to get in touch with him and he agreed to make one. I picked it up my first day back and then while at the welcome home party Cleo and Rikki arranged for me I presented it to her as a gift."

"It was kinda funny at the time seeing as I'd had a similar idea and had gone and had a moonstone necklace made for her for the same reason," Bella said. "We both got a bit of a laugh out of it and we've been good friends ever since. Now we all wear both necklaces to show that we're all one group even though we started in different places."

I smiled. "I like that. It was a good solution. I doubt you guys would have been able to get along with each other had you not done it that way. Both the being kept informed and the exchange of gifts."

"So do we. That's why I'm glad it worked out like it did. Before I came here I though I was alone," Bella said. "Now I know I'm part of something special and I have made some great friends that I know will always be here for me and I'll be here for them too."

"Yeah. I kinda know how that first part feels. The being alone part." I stood up. "Well I don't think you'll just accept me as part of the group but I do hope we've at least gotten to the point of coexisting peacefully. I'll go for now." I headed to the door, but stopped before opening it. "Oh, by the way. We've removed the cameras, our survey is done, but we still have a sonar tracker on the ship so you'll still have to be somewhat careful."

They all nodded at me and Emma moved away from the door and let me leave. I headed back to the ship, and Denman asked me how it had gone.

"Well we didn't become friends but we did find some stuff we could all talk about and understand in each other." I said. Denman of course assumed I'd meant their past time as mermaids. I didn't correct her. I also didn't realize that I had just done to her what Lewis had done to the girls. Hopefully when she found out she would take it a bit better. And maybe I'd learn to stop tempting fate too.

## 8. Chapter 8: Impasse

### Authors Note:

I think by now I can stop adding this part, we all know I don't own this.

OK! Now for the part of the story you've all been waiting for. The main event. The next several chapters will really get things going. Join me as we let the good times roll.

### Chapter 8: Impasse

The next few days had us writing up reports to submit to the various Reps. we'd been hired by to do our survey. Denman had me do a few of them, all part of being a marine biologist and researcher, and thankfully they didn't need too much editing. I was proud of that.

Some of the meetings were held here on the ship and others Denman had to meet elsewhere. We were pleased to say that the trend was for things to return to normal. The fish and other marine wild life were returning to their native waters. This announcement was met with relief and we were thanked, profusely, by most of them for our help.

Things had finally settled down and Denman finally found some time to talk to me about the work we had been doing for the last year and a half. I had been expecting her to come to me soon, but I had been assuming it would be to continue the research. She caught me by surprise.

"Well, Laura, now that we're done with all the surveys, reports, and meetings I thought we should talk about our other research. I'm glad to let you know we're done!" She said while dropping a very thick binder on the table between us. I sat up in surprise, pulled the binder over, and began to flip through it.

"What do you mean done?" I asked.

"Exactly what it sounds like. We've gotten all the data we can. So there is no need to ask you to jump through any more hoops, so to speak."

I kept flipping pages, briefly scanning over them as I went. It was very thorough, but I hadn't missed the particular way she'd chosen to phrase part of her last statement to me.

"All the data we can? You mean you could possibly get more then?" I asked her, seeking clarification.

"Not with out violating basic human rights, endangered species laws, and your own personal free will."

"Oh." I looked up at her and blinked owlishly a few times. "So that means we can publish this and I'll be OK, right?"

"Not quite." She thought for a moment. "What do you remember about my lessons on peer evaluation and research validation?"

Ah. That's right. I had almost forgotten about that. "Once we publish this we open it up for all your peers in the field to evaluate and/or attempt to validate your findings by performing the same tests you did and seeing if they arrive at the same results or observations."

"Correct. And what does that mean for you?"

"That I'd have to be poked and prodded, and made to perform what ever demonstrations they ask me too, and not all of them are going to be as nice as you."

"It's more than that actually. Until they finish you won't be able to be classified as a new and highly endangered species. Most of them, therefore, wouldn't feel the need to adhere to those regulations."

"What!" I'd shot to my feet. "How could they justify that?"

"For them it would be easy, as some of them would prefer to think of you as a research specimen rather than as a research subject. A small difference in words but to some a large difference in terminology interpretation." She let out a breath, and after taking a seat continued. "To many a 'Subject' refers to doing testing on a human, and there are many rules that need to be followed for that. The person needs to agree and be fully informed of all procedures before they can be done, and you need to pay them for their cooperation as well. However, a 'Specimen' is anything else and covers a wide range of rules and classifications and seeing as you are something new they will try to argue that you don't fit in any of them yet, and therefore none of them apply to you."

I felt like I wanted to just hit my head on the table, repeatedly, but I knew it wouldn't actually do much other than give me a headache so I didn't give in to the impulse. Instead I put my energy towards a better use, analyzing the situation to look for a solution. I wasn't able to come up with anything.

"So what do we do? I'm drawing a complete blank here."

"Well there are two things we can do that will give us more control of things after publishing and presenting our work. The first we can't do, that is find more subjects to get a wider data set and compile averages accounting for variables across the species."

I wisely kept my mouth shut for once. I had promised after all. Instead I asked, "And the other thing we can do?"

"We arrange for validation to be done before publishing by one or more of my peers. This will allow us to pick and choose who we let do the tests and hold them to a contract as well. That would protect your rights, and might even get us enough that you can immediately be recognized as both a new and endangered species as well as a human variant, much the way the arctic wolf and the timber wolf are. That being they can intermix and have viable off spring yet are in many ways different in the environmental adaptations they have developed."

"I though you had a doctorate in marine biology. Why aren't you using

different marine animals for that example."

"I studied a lot of other stuff in school too, and I chose to pick something you might be more familiar with since you're still learning." She gave a small, but polite, chuckle at my reaction. "I've already starting putting out some feelers to several of my peers I think we can trust. So far they've all refused to participate unless I give them more information about what I am researching. They've also quibbled about my using the term 'subject' when referencing you."

"And you don't want to give them too many details and start rumors before we are ready."

"Exactly!"

I groaned. This was going to get crazy. I just knew it.

"So then no luck so far."

"Yeah, no luck. I might even have to ask my old doctorate prof. but since he's retired from field work to teaching full time I'd rather wait on asking him. I may not have any choice though if this trend of rejection continues."

She quickly stood and gathered up the binder. "But let me worry about that. You go have some fun. I don't have any lessons for you right now so I guess you can consider yourself at the start of a summer break if you like."

"It's almost December, I think you mean winter."

"South of the equator Laura."

I smacked my forehead with the palm of my hand. "Oh right. The seasons reverse down here, duh! So is that the full three months of break then?"

"Give or take," she answered me. "I'm going to be busy with finding someone so until I do you're free to have some fun. We'll be staying local until then so take this chance to do some exploring. Just let me know if you're going to be out for several day's in succession so I'll know to contact you if I do find someone in that time."

SWEET! This was going to be so much fun.

"Oh one last thing," Denman walked over to me with an envelope and handed it to me. "This is your share of the payment for out work here. As part of the team you've earned your fair share and definitely did a lot of the hands on work out in the water."

I opened it and nearly choked. "That's... wow... you're not kidding me are you?"

"Nope. This isn't the first time I've given you your share. Why are you so surprised?"

"It's several thousand, that's why!"

"Well we were being funded by a lot of different groups and they all

pooled a fund together."

"I don't even want to know how much you got!"

"Oh I chose to take the ship and some of the gear as part of my payment. That way I can do more research and need to rent less stuff in the future. It's a trick of the trade you should take to heart." She smiled and shooed me off to go be a kid for a while, and started to tidy up her new ship.

After a quick stop to deposit my pay check. I took off to have some fun. I went shopping, had dinner out, and even took in a movie. In general I had a blast.

My vacation went on for a couple of months. I didn't spend the whole time going overboard, just that first day, but you can't blame me for that. Denman kept getting turned down and eventually did reach out to her old teacher. As for me I ended up spending a lot of time with the girls. At first they'd pop seemingly out of nowhere and just talk to me for a bit. As time went on I realized they were making sure I had kept my promise, and that I wasn't bait for a trap.

Eventually they seemed to come to the decision that I hadn't told and that I wasn't going to and they started to warm up to me. They asked me about my time with Denman, often surprised at how much better things were for me, and started to open up about themselves in return. I eventually got to hear the whole story, even about Charlotte, and meet the guys in their lives. Most of them anyways as Lewis wasn't due to return for another half year, give or take a month or two.

Emma and Ash were still taking things slow since her return, and were once again in the hazy area between being friends and a couple. Ash had accepted a management position at the cafe after Emma came back and Emma had worked up to being assistant manager under him. They worked very well together and I knew in time they'd be back together.

I met Zane the owner. At times he acted like a spoiled brat and then look chagrined at having done it. After having heard the full story I could see that he'd eventually started to learn from his mistakes, but a life time of making them was a hard habit to break. From our time talking about Denman, Rikki eventually agreed that she and Zane could remain friends, but that was all. He took the chance he was being given and freely admitted it was probably all his fault anyways. Rikki called that progress and he started joining our group when he had the time.

Then finally I met Bella's boyfriend Will. A former competitive free diver he was the only one that could even make an attempt at keeping up with the girls in the water and would go diving with them whenever he could. He'd been thrilled when Emma had returned and was really excited to meet me. He thought mermaids were extremely cool but never let himself forget that we were also people too. He was also Bella's biggest fan, often making requests for songs whenever the band played live. I liked him and told Bella if she ever let him go I'd call dibs. She told me that wouldn't happen cause she wasn't gonna let him go.

Despite all the time I spent with them I could still feel a distance

between us and I knew it was my association with Denman that caused it. But then one day about a week into the third month of my extended holiday things changed. In a big way.

We were at an impasse, Denman had asked every peer she trusted that had a doctorate, and gotten nothing but refusals. She'd then turned to those with a masters, working on a doctorate or not, and gotten more of the same. She didn't know many of those that were under that but the few she did know also turned her down, and she admitted there was only one undergrad she'd trust. Cleo's boyfriend, Lewis, but she had no idea where he was, how to find him, or if he'd forgive her for using him as bait for the girls.

I'd offered to ask Cleo and the others about finding him. She reluctantly agreed, even to letting the girls know the whole reason, and I went to them. After a lot of explaining, fast talking, and even some begging bordering on outright groveling they agreed on the condition that Denman ask them herself. I'd offered to arrange a meet but they insisted on going right that moment, even Bella, though she'd hang back and just listen in just in case there was any trouble, and that was the day everything changed.

As we were nearing the ship I saw a man on deck that I didn't know looking through Denman's research laptop and quickly led us to a nearby out of view spot where we could both see and hear. After a bit of a wait I knew Denman wasn't on the ship and was in the process of telling the girls to wait there while I figured out what was going on. I didn't get far when Emma hissed out for us to duck and we all saw Denman approach the ship.

She stormed up the pier, fury clearly on her face, and she didn't even slow as she jumped onto the ship, and slammed her laptop closed and yanked it away from the stranger. We quickly and as quietly as we could crept closer, keeping low to avoid being seen as much as possible. Though from the way they stared at each other we could have swam up and they'd never have noticed.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Denman yelled in full fury.

"Ah, little Linda. It's been a while," he responded in a calmer tone.

"Don't you 'it's been a while' with me. This is my research, you had no right to look at it without my permission!"

"Well it seems you have made some amazing discoveries, but you were so vague when you contacted me I felt I should come out here in person and take a look," he smiled and leaned forward in his seat. "And I'm glad I did. You seem to have let your emotions get in the way of doing proper research. Well I'll help you fix that and do the validation you need so badly too."

Denman put the laptop down and placed her hands, balled into fists, on each side of it as she leaned over and in a deadly whisper filled with cold fury asked him, "What do you mean about proper research and my emotions?"

"Oh just that you treat your specimen as if it's opinion matters that's all," he said unperturbed.

"Leave! Now." She hissed. "I don't know you anymore."

"You feel that strongly about it?" Denman just glared. "I see you do. Why? What is this to you?"

"She," Denman put a strong emphasis on that one word. "Is the brightest student I have ever taught and the best friend that I have ever had, and if you think that she is in anyway a thing to be sliced up and neatly put in a box of slides then you can just go to hell. I'll say it one last time, leave!"

"Does she know we are here?" Cleo whispered to me.

"No." I whispered back. "I never got the chance to tell her you all were coming."

"Shh." Rikki hissed.

The man had started laughing. It was a jolly, rolling, and uncontrollable laughter.

"You think this is funny? That I'm joking?" Denman had leaned closer.

"Oh calm down Linda. You know me better than that." He laughed harder. "But you should see the look on your face!"

"What?" This sudden change had caught her by surprised and she wasn't sure what to make of it yet. It had slowed her fury but not abated it.

"You'll figure it out. You were always my 'brightest student' to borrow your phrase." He had settled down some but was still chuckling.

"You mean to say you were testing me? That you pushed my buttons to see how I would react?" This seemed to only get her riled up again. "Why the hell would you do that?"

"Linda when you came back from your last trip here all you had was a small, yet amazing, sample and a broken spirit. I was worried for you. I had to wonder what would have happened to make you doubt yourself so." He indicated she should sit. She refused by just continuing to glare at him and with a shrug he continued. "But then not even a month ago I got a call and you were full of life again, and asking me to come and help you validate some research, something big, something that you couldn't tell me over the phone, and it got me curious. So I decided to come here and see for myself."

Denman got up and started pacing around, agitated. More confused now then furious, but the fury wasn't by any means gone. "And for that you dropped everything, traveled half way around the globe, walked onto my boat, and looked at my notes? What about your students?"

"I've been fully retired at the end of last term. Teaching a class of so many at once just wasn't something I enjoyed, so I took early retirement and was enjoying my free time when you called. Now I'm here and I'm glad I came. Can I meet her? This special young lady



that has rekindled the fire in your heart and reforged your spirit?"

"You mean that?" Denman stopped pacing and looked at him. Her eyes were still hard, but hopeful that he meant what he'd said.

"Who the hell is that?" Rikki asked me in a whisper.

"I don't know," I replied. "I've never seen him before."

"Not him, her!" Rikki corrected still in a whisper.

"That's Denman! You should recognize that!" I whispered back confused.

"It looks like Denman, but it sure as hell doesn't sound like Denman." Emma interjected quietly.

"I do mean that Linda. I want to help. I see where you are going and I agree. The young lady needs to be protected and I want to help ensure that. She is one of a kinda after." He stood up and offered his hand.

Denman glared at his hand for a moment. Then slowly reached out and shook it. "I'm still mad at you. I don't like getting pushed around like that, especially by you. But you hit on the heart of the matter. She is one of a kind."

"I'm sensing you know more about that. What happened Linda?" he sounded concerned.

"She's not the first one I found..." Denman explained about her finding of Emma, Cleo, and Rikki. Her theory's about the moon pools and the energy in them and that with the damage she couldn't do any tests to confirm anything, and finally about the lunar eclipse and the events that happened.

The man surged to his feet, his face now a thundercloud, "Did you forget everything I'd taught you? How every living thing is deserving of our respect and compassion. Well did you?"

Denman didn't answer. The anger in her eyes finally fading to be replaced by the guilt I remembered from when I'd first met her. "Yes." It was barely a whisper when she finally did.

"Have you made amends yet?"

Her hand went to the side of her face, she pulled it back when she realized what she'd done.

"I'll take that as a yes. It seems you got what you deserved. If I hadn't seen in your notes that you've completely turned things around and were doing things the right way I'd have left already. Our job is to study and preserve. I know many have forgotten that, but you shouldn't have, even for that one brief time. I taught you that!."

"I'm sorry!" she practically screamed out. "I screwed up and I paid for it, I still am. I can't change what happened I can only learn from it and do better in the future. I... I... I can't do any more

then that." She finished in a whisper.

He nodded, calm now. "Well little Linda this is going to make it more difficult. With only one representative for her race in existence we have to make sure she's protected and that means we'll need her full cooperation. Pity there aren't others to allow us to compile an average range for their race as a whole. Even just the other three you betrayed would be a huge help."

Denman nodded to him and I decided that now would be a good time to go over and introduce myself. I turned to ask the girls to wait here only to find they had moved a short distance away and were holding a whispered conversation between themselves that I'd missed while keeping my focus on what was happening on the ship.

I scooted over to them and they stopped and looked at me. I was about to ask what was going on when they grabbed me and half tossed half dragged me into the water with them. I was so surprised that I'm sure I screamed as we fell in.

What. The. Hell?

I was completely stunned. So stunned I just stayed there floating trying to figure out what they were thinking that I almost didn't realize when they had grabbed me again and started dragging me towards the ship. Once I figured out where they were going to I tried to stop them, indicating with hand motions that they should go and I would head to the ship alone. Seemed they'd come to some sort of decision about that and, with me in the center, dragged me to the surface right in front of the dive platform at the aft of the ship.

And right in front of Denman and her unknown companion, who had headed to the rear of the ship when they'd heard either my scream, the splash, or more likely both to see what was going on.

"Uh hi," I said kinda lamely. "I'm, uh..., Denman's assistant Laura. I guess I should introduce you to some good friends of mine."

Denman took two hesitant steps closer, and I could see it as her eyes landed on each of us taking us in and counting heads. She did this twice and then a third time before her eyes bugged out in the realization that she wasn't seeing things and then she dropped to the deck and just knelt there not moving. She wasn't even blinking.

"Well little Linda seems your assistant has a bit of a surprise for us. It looks like there are now five. Still so few and very precious, but much better than just one. Uh... Linda. Linda? Oh dear."

"Uh, guys. I think you broke her." I said.

## 9. Chapter 9: Discussion

### Authors Note:

OK so I've been going over what I've written so far and while I enjoy how the story and plot are going, dear god could I maybe put in some descriptions! To this end I have decided that once I finish the story

and plot I will be rewriting this to improve the details and to in general give you a better idea of the surroundings. This version of the story will serve as the outline for the improved version, my question to you all is do you want me to leave this version up so you can see the difference or to replace it with the new version. I don't wish to make a poll for this as I'd prefer you to be able to post to me your choice and include why you'd prefer that choice as well as any suggestions you might have in a review. Thank you all in advance and now on with the plot.

## Chapter 9: Discussion

I was sitting on the edge of my bed. We'd carried Denman down here after she had collapsed and I was nominated to stay down here with her until she recovered. Cleo, Rikki, Emma, and Bella were up on deck with Denman's old professor, who had introduced himself as Dr. Randolph Simmons.

I'd had a brief moment to ask them why now, and they'd said they'd tell me later. For now they wanted to get to know Dr. Simmons better, claiming their initial impression of him was more positive then their impression of Denman. That left me down here waiting for the verbal scolding that I'd been dreading for a while now.

"H-h-how?" Denman finally said showing signs of life.

"The eclipse was temporary," I answered. "Only works for twelve hours. It takes a full alignment of all the planets to be permanent."

"You knew?" Her voice still sounded dead. I wondered just how long that would last for. Maybe long enough for me to explain in full and avoid getting yelled at. I could only hope.

"Yeah, they told me. I figured out they were still mermaids a while ago."

"And you said nothing?" She finally looked at me.

"They asked me not to, and well, I just figured it might be better if I could convince them to tell you. It just didn't go quite how I expected." I said sheepishly.

Denman said nothing for a bit. She just stared at me, her face devoid of expression gazing at nothing in particular. I didn't know what was going through her mind but I chose to be silent, giving her time to think. She'd speak eventually.

"I guess I can understand why they said nothing, but you should have said something. Did you think I would try to lock them in a cage again?"

"No. But they did, and you can't blame them for that. It's the only impression of you they ever had a chance to get. They've been asking me about you and I've been trying to show them a better side of you. I figured if I shared enough with them that they might eventually talk to you, and if I could get them to spend some time with you they might see for themselves that things were different and make the choice themselves."

"Really?" Her voice was starting to rise in volume. "And you didn't consider my feelings?"

"Yes. I did. I just figured it would be better if they told you only cause it would mean they'd come to the point where they could forgive you and maybe even trust you. I knew you'd be upset with me," I sighed. "But I figured you would forgive me. You know, good intentions and all that. Right?"

Her gaze narrowed as she stared at me and I suddenly found the floor to be very interesting. I swallowed nervously, waiting for her to pass judgment. The silence stretched, and each time I glanced up I found her still glaring at me. Waiting. Watching. Eventually I cracked.

"I'm sorry." I finally said. "But I really felt it wasn't mine to share. I didn't plan it to happen like this. But I just-" I swallowed and looked up at her, I could feel myself on the edge of tears. "I'm really sorry."

Her expression didn't change for a while, but then she finally nodded and relaxed her glare. She stood and took a moment to get herself put back together then turned to the door and took a deep breath letting it out slowly. Steeling herself for what waited above.

"Well you're forgiven, but remember this old saying for next time." She turned to look at me. "The road to Hell is paved with good intentions. Now let's go. I have apologies to make and I expect I'm going to get hit again too."

She lead the way out and up the stairs. I followed her meekly, thinking hard on what she'd said. She paused one last time at the top of the stairs, and after gathering herself turned and headed out onto deck to meet with the girls.

They were sitting across from Dr. Simmons, they all had a glass of something in front of them, of what I couldn't tell from this distance. They were all smiles and laughter, but I knew that was about to change.

"Ah Linda, welcome. I'm glad to see you are back with us," Dr. Simmons rose and came over to greet her. "These girls are a joy. Quite interesting lives they've had. It's been such a great opportunity just to talk with them. Join us, and your assistant, Laura was it, should join us as well."

He led us over to the table and to a pair of seats that were waiting for us. "I hope you don't mind but I took the liberty of raiding the galley and found some lemonade, quite good actually, and very refreshing on such a hot day. Would you care for a glass? Either of you?"

"Not just yet," Denman said.

"Sure!" I said right on top of her.

Denman cut a look at me and I just sunk down in the chair next to the other girls and looked away.

"Linda, don't be angry with your assistant. She did the right thing

by keeping their confidence and should not be judge to harshly for it. I've been talking with them and I dare say that between what you told me and what they've confirmed I agree that they didn't have much reason to trust you with their secret until now." Dr. Simmons said in a reproachful tone to her while filling a glass and placing it in front of me.

"Until now?" She looked at the girls curious. "I don't understand. What changed?"

Emma made a sort of go ahead gesture to Dr. Simmons, indicating he should be the one to explain. He nodded and after taking a sip of lemonade proceeded to explain.

"They were on their way over here to discuss one Lewis McCartney and how you wished to contact him about possibly assisting you with validation when they saw me on board your ship. Not knowing who I was they chose to hide while waiting for your assistant to come and inquire as to my identity and intentions."

He took another sip as he considered his next words. "Well as I'm sure you know before she could do that you arrived, angry as a Barracuda, and looking as if you fully intended me harm should I not explain to your satisfaction. They crept close enough to listen in, not so much to spy, but more because they didn't know who I was or what you planned to do, and they wanted more information to work with before making any overly hasty decisions."

He took another sip and smiled at her, "One could say they were most impressed by how quickly you were to come to the defense of your assistant when I was testing you. This was further aided by the fact that you were unaware of their presence and were therefore speaking your true feelings on the matter and not just 'putting on a show' for their benefit. They were swayed by how much you had changed in the last two years since your first unfortunate encounter with them, and, along with everything your assistant had shared, they chose to reevaluate their choice."

Denman opened her mouth to speak and he held up a hand to stop her. "Please allow me to finish, I'm almost done." She closed her mouth and nodded for him to continue. He took another sip before doing so. "At this point they went some distance off and discussed the issue amongst themselves with out your assistant overhearing, this was aided by her being so intently focused on our discussion, and they arrived at the decision to share the truth with you. They ultimately decided the best method would be the most direct, to let you see the truth. They figured you'd be more willing to believe your eyes than their word. It would seem they were correct, and now here we all are."

Denman leaned forward and considered what she would say for a moment. When she was ready she stood up and after a deep breath faced the Emma, Rikki, and Cleo.

"I don't really know what to say to you three, but I guess saying sorry is probably the best place to begin. So I'm sorry. I'm very, very sorry. I know that won't undo the past, won't instantly make things all right, but it's the least you deserve from me. That said I feel I owe you a debt for my treatment of you, one that I don't know if I can ever pay, but if you'll give me a chance I will do all I can

to make it up to you."

She stood there waiting, patiently, for their answer. They stared at her for a while, letting her stew in her own nervousness. Eventually it was Rikki that broke the silence.

"We accept. But while we have decided to grant you a second chance don't think for a moment we've forgiven you. You have a very long way to go for that if you can earn it at all."

"I understand, thank you. I'm glad to have the chance to at least make things right, that's more than I ever hoped for. I will do my best to prove that I'm worthy of that chance. Once again, thank you."

"Oh and one last thing," Rikki said standing and walking around to her. "I believe I owe you something as well." And she slapped Denman across the face, twice.

Wincing Denman said, "Three for three. I guess we're now square on that part."

Rikki just nodded before returning to her seat.

"Now that that's done with, we can move on." Emma said. "Sit and we'll answer your questions if you answer ours."

"That sounds fair," Denman said as she took her seat. "Who gets to go first?"

"I believe the young ladies here should have the first question." Dr. Simmons suggested and Denman nodded her agreement.

"Well then we want to know the reason for your research on mermaids." Cleo said first. "I mean what do you plan to get from it all?"

"Well what I hope to get has changed a lot since we first met. Back then I didn't know what my end goals were I just wanted to pick you apart and find what I could. I am sorry for that." Denman said. "But now I hope to secure as normal a life as it is possible for you to have. The best way to do that is to collect enough data to prove you are real and not a bunch of girls in costumes, and to have you protected by law, international law, so that no matter where you choose to go to you won't ever have to worry. My turn now?" They nodded. "Then my question would be who are you?"

"I'm Bella. I became a mermaid in Ireland when I was only nine years old."

That caught Denman by surprise. "Nine? You've been a mermaid for that long? And no one ever found out?"

"Well that didn't last after I got here but it's our turn now. So what do you need from us that you don't already have from Laura?" Bella asked.

"We need data from you to be able to show a range over several members of your species." Dr. Simmons answered for her. "It helps when you can show differences between individuals in a given species."

"Right I should have known that," Cleo said. "I've heard Lewis go on about it enough."

He chuckled kindly at that. "I will therefore ask you four if you would be willing to assist us. I've seen Linda's research so far and I can assure you she has found several methods to perform her tests that are very ingenious and non-invasive. You would be in no danger from undergoing them."

"Like what?" Emma asked.

"I'll answer this one," I said. "Honestly most were my suggestions anyways." I looked at the other girls. "I suggested to her the use of modern medical equipment to stand in for the need to cut me open. MRI's, X-rays, and such. It proved to be effective and didn't require much of me at all beyond the ability to hold still for the length of the test."

"That's actually a kinda good alternative. I think we can go along with that." Bella said. "What do you guys say?"

They all agreed and we went back and forth for a while. When would they be free to do this, what other tests would we do, and other details. Finally we came to the last question how to approach our unique mermaid ability to control water. It was the big problem as it was not something you'd believe unless you saw it in action. This of course led to us doing demonstrations for Dr. Simmons. He was suitably impressed.

Rikki demonstrated by heating some water for him to make an afternoon cup of tea, Emma grabbed some coffee stir sticks and turned her glass of lemonade into a Popsicle, Cleo just pulled bubbles of it out and drank them out of mid air, and Bella turned her's into Jelly. I explained how I could do all of that but it was at a much reduced level of power, and demonstrated by taking half a minute to turn my glass into Jelly.

The girls then asked me if I'd ever figured out what my last power did, and if I would demonstrate it for them now. I agreed, but I never would have expected the results to have been what they were.

I had finished gathering up my focus and with my hand palm up and clenched into a fist I gathered up what I could only describe as the essence of my four abilities. As I felt it gather it pulsed out of me like it always did, but as usual it had no effect on any of the liquid around us. It did however cause the girls to jump to their feet in shock.

"What in the world is that?" Bella demanded.

I stopped. "Wait? You felt that? What did it feel like?"

"Like I'd been plugged into a huge battery is what it felt like!" she said.

"I wonder if that's not exactly what it was. Emma freeze the water off the side of the boat." Rikki said.

Shrugging Emma got up and froze a circle of water about one meter

across. "Now do your thing," Rikki told me. Shrugging I did so. "OK Emma, do it again." This time the circle was easily five times the size of the last one.

"Whoa! Did you see that?" Emma exclaimed. "That was so easy. It's never been that easy to cover that much area before."

"Don't stop." Rikki told me. "Cleo see how much you can move."

With a shrug Cleo raised a huge volume of water, her eyes bugged out and she dropped it quickly.

"Well that settles it, your last power is meant to work with ours. I think that's why you have all of ours, so you can power each of them, or something like that." Rikki said.

"Cool." I said.

"We could have used you when Cleo, Rikki, and I knocked that comet back into space." Bella said, "Heck just having Emma there would have made a huge difference."

"Wait! You did what?" Denman said shocked.

"You were able to redirect a comet that was about to crash into the earth with your powers?" Dr. Simmons was also more than a bit shocked.

The girls just nodded. "That's why mermaids exist. To stop that comet from destroying all life here on earth." Bella said.

"It's why we were called." Rikki added.

"It's a mermaids destiny to protect the earth." Cleo finished.

"It nearly killed you three to do it too." Emma reminded them. "I wish I'd been here to help, you wouldn't have cut it so close then."

"I do too. Even though I didn't know about it I supposed it was my destiny too, and I should have been here." I said.

"Well now that we know about your real power we sure wish you were here. It would have been worlds easier then." Bella said.

Things wound down after that. We returned to our seats, arranged times for the girls to do initial tests, and for myself to do validation tests with Dr. Simmons. Cleo even agreed to get in touch with Lewis and see if he'd be willing to help. Before we left the girls had one last question.

"OK. Let's say things work out best case, you get all the data you need, you announce us to the world, we get accepted, granted protected status, then what?"

"Well then you girls no longer have to go running to a back room if you get wet. You can go to the beach and swim and no one can do you harm. Basically you can just live your lives with out having to constantly fear being discovered if you happen to get wet." Denman told them. "You'll still be mermaids, and special, but with the world



knowing you won't have to constantly hide all the time."

"I think I'd like that. Might be nice to not have to worry all the time." Cleo said.

"I think we all would." Bella agreed.

"That's the final reason we agreed to give you a second chance," Rikki said. "Don't mess it up!"

"Don't worry. I won't." Denman said. She held out to each of them a slightly modified version of the contract I had with her. The only change being that they wouldn't have to sign on as her assistant. They all signed and we got Kenichi to act as witness. As the only one that didn't participate in any research he was able to act as an independent third party.

After that the girls excused themselves and headed home. Shortly after Dr. Simmons took his leave as well.

"Well there's no going back now." Denman said to me.

"I know." I replied. "But I can't hide my whole life. Sometimes things happen, things you can't avoid. All you can do is prepare for them, and doing this is the best I can come up with."

"Well get some sleep. It's getting late and we start early tomorrow."

"Good night. Dr." I said.

"Good night," she said back.

I headed down to bed eager for the morning to come. Things were starting to look up for once.

## 10. Chapter 10: Tests

### Authors Note:

A big hello to all my readers. I'm glad you've all stuck with me so far and I'm glad you're still enjoying it. Sorry for the delay from my usual pace but I hope you'll forgive me a short break. But now back to the story.

### Chapter 10: Tests

The next morning started bright and early, well early at least. Some how the girls had been talked into being the one's to wake me up. They tried everything, shaking me didn't work, ice on my spine only put me in my tail and got me even more relaxed and deeper asleep, and even yanking all the covers off didn't work. After half an hour of failing Denman brought down a cup of coffee and placed it on the nightstand next to me saying "there's a trick to waking her up. You just have to know what she really want's first thing in the morning."

The woman cheats but if it works, it works. I was soon awake and looking at four very annoyed sister mermaids. "Oh you're here. Let's

go!" And then I fell onto the floor. "You got me wet?"

"Well it works on my younger brother," Emma said. "I though we'd could try it."

I just shook my head, this was going to be one of Those days. Thankfully I was wrong, depending on who you ask anyways.

On the first day of testing we got physicals.

"You want to what?"

"Check your heart rate, blood pressure, O2 levels, and then do it all again after you change." Denman said.

"What for?" Emma asked.

"Well the first time she tested me she found my O2 level went up and my heart rate and over all blood pressure lowered. If it's the same for you guys it means that our body's move blood and oxygen more efficiently as mermaids." I answered.

"I hope I'm not too late." Dr. Simmons was walking up.

"Nope right on time, were about to get a base line on heart rate and Oxygen levels. If you could help me get the equipment set up we can get started." Denman said.

"My pleasure," he answered.

Things went along smoothly and the results were all similar to mine on the first time around. With minor acceptable variance.

Three days later we had the second tests. Breath holding.

"OK so on our prior tests with Laura we found that one minute of breath holding normally is about fifteen minutes as mermaids. So we'll need to test you both before and after. One at a time for the first part then all at once for the second." Denman explained.

We all got over four minutes in the first test. Then we changed and started the second test.

Approximately one hour and seven minutes later only Rikki and Emma were left. They were staring at each other both determined to be the one that could go the longest.

"Twenty says the looser loses by passing out," I offered.

"Done!" Bella said.

"You can't be serious about that. No way would they hold their breath till they pass out that has to be bad for you," Cleo said.

"Oh it is. But you know those two the best, how competitive are they? Usually anyways." I asked her.

Cleo groaned. "I think you might actually win that bet."

Turns out I did, or would have if the bet was invalidated due to them

both loosening. By passing out of course. Well I was half right. But that wasn't the best part. The best part was when they woke up and the first thing they asked was who passed out first. You know, just like in that movie with Clint Eastwood and Tommy Lee Jones. Yeah. Just like that.

Third tests were a week later when the dry suits arrived.

"What are these?" Cleo asked.

"These are what I've been waiting on for the next test," Denman said. "Their called-"

"Basting bags." I supplied for her.

"No they are not," she said. "I don't know why you insist on calling them that."

"Cause they slow cook you in your own juices like a thanksgiving turkey." I answered.

"So does that make us all turkeys?" Rikki asked.

"Yes." I answered as I laid down and looked up at the clouds. "But do remember I'm doing this for the second time, willingly. So if you four are turkey's what does that make me?"

"Dunno. Guess we'll find out." Bella said.

"As I was saying," Denman broke in. "These are called Dry Suits."

"I still think basting bag is more accurate but this is your show." I said.

"Thanks ever so much." she said to me. "Now while wearing these you girls can get in the water and not change. This will let us test how your body reacts to water pressure at different depths. I'd like to have you go down ten meters and twenty meters at least. If you think you can make thirty you are welcome to do so."

"OK. And that proves what?" Emma asked.

"By itself. Not much." Dr. Simmons said. "But after that we'll have you dive again as mermaids and see how deep you need to go to have a comparative reaction to the pressure."

"OK. I guess that makes sense." Bella said. "So who's first."

"I'll go first since I just want to get this part over with quickly," Cleo said.

Cleo got sensor disks stuck all over her arms, legs, and body. Then she got suited up, given an air tight mask, and told to dive. She made it to ten and twenty meters and then came back up. Bella, Emma, and Rikki were impressed that the suits worked, Cleo just wanted out of the oven.

"Told ya!" I said. Cleo tried to glare at me, but seeing as she was soaked in sweat it lost something.

I insisted on going last. By the time the others were all done and it was my turn they all looked at me like I was insane.

"You're seriously going to put that thing on?" Rikki asked.

"After you've done this before and know exactly what's going to happen?" Cleo followed.

"And after waiting till we all had a turn just so we could understand what you meant too." Bella pointed out.

"Yes. I am." I answered.

"You're completely insane!" Emma said.

"Hmmm... I guess you were right Dr. Denman, I really should cut back on the coffee it's starting to effect my judgment." I said while getting sensors stuck on me.

"Oh now you decide you drink too much." she sighed. "OK suit up and go."

"Going, going." I said getting suited up. "Seriously if one of you see's my common sense tell it I'm looking for it."

"Too late it's long gone." Rikki said.

"Right." I dove in.

Next we did the dives as mermaids. We still had to take turns, but that was due more to only having enough sensors for one of us at a time then any other reason. As before each of us had to go ten times as deep before our bodies reacted to the pressure the same.

"Wow!" Emma said. "I'm glad Will isn't here. He'd be going crazy."

"Not like he hasn't seen us dive really deep before." Rikki said.

"Well yeah I know that, but he's never seen us go down to two hundred meters before." Emma replied.

"Didn't he say he got down to eighty meters and set some kind of local record?" I asked.

"Yes he did." Cleo said.

"Emma?" I asked.

"Yes?"

"If you would be so kind, would you point out to everyone here how deep we would have to do to do an equivalent feat, please." I asked her.

"Well I guess with us being able to go ten times as deep we'd have to go down..." She choked as she did the math.

"Well? Emma tell us!" Rikki said getting impatient. Cleo and Bella

however had already figured it out.

"We'd have to go down eight hundred meters Rikki," Cleo said.

Rikki just turned pale.

"Impressive." Dr. Simmons said. "You young ladies are most impressive. Shall we break for lunch now?"

"What's for lunch?" I asked.

Denman came out of the galley and back on deck with a tray of sandwiches. We all took a share and dug in.

"Turkey?" I raised an eyebrow at her. "Really? You made turkey sandwiches?"

"I thought it was appropriate," She answered me.

I nodded and drew a vertical line in the air with my index finger. "Point for you. Well played."

She nodded her head as if she was taking a bow, and we all laughed and ate lunch.

It took several weeks to complete the MRI scans and X-rays due to having to not only get access but keep all other personal out. So they were only able to do one of us at a time.

"Hey Bella!" I greeted her as she came into the cafe. She came over and sat down across from me. "So how was it?" I asked more quietly.

"My head really hurts." She moaned.

"Let me guess. You fell asleep," she nodded, "and when they woke you up at the end you got real startled," another nod, "and then you sat up real fast and banged your head on the top of the MRI machine?"

"How did you know?" She asked.

"Same thing happened to me," I held out a bottle. "Aspirin?"

"Yes, please. And thank you."

"No problem." She started to hand it back. "Nah, you keep it for the others. I bet they'll need it too."

Turned out, I was right. They all ended up needing it. Of course that didn't match how embarrassed I felt when it happened to me, again, and I had to get the bottle handed back to me by Rikki. She tried not to laugh. Tried real hard too. Still failed though.

The final tests were much easier, requiring only skin samples and cheek swabs. A few scales knocked loose from our tails and a few q-tips and we were done. Dr. Denman and Dr. Simmons then spent several weeks compiling the data and writing reports. We got some much needed down time. Right up until the next full moon anyways.

We'd all thought that with Mako broken the moon would no longer affect us. Turns out we were wrong. Not because of Mako getting fixed or anything but because we got complacent about it and ended up getting caught by surprise. Turned out that was the deciding factor. If we saw the moon and we were prepared for it we could fight off it's influence. But as I said we got complacent and that is what made that night very memorable, at least for the guys and for Denman. As usual we didn't remember a thing.

## 11. Chapter 11: Moon Dancing

### Authors Note:

For your reading pleasure a double post tonight. This chapter wasn't originally part of the story, but it came to me while on a break at work today and before I knew it I'd spent my entire lunch break mapping this out. After that I knew I just had to add it, because I just couldn't resist the lure of it. So enjoy this bonus chapter both for the night and for the story. Cheers!

### Chapter 11: Moon Dancing!

We sat around a table in Rikki's cafe. Talking about all that had passed, how much things had changed, how the girls had never thought they'd cooperate with Denman, and even more so about the fact that we were actually going to reveal our biggest secret to the whole world. They decided they needed one last night where it was just them, just the mermaids, and no one else. I was really surprised when they invited me too.

"Your sure?" I asked.

"Yes. You're one of us now." Emma said.

"Even though I came with, well, her?" I asked.

"Yes. I still don't like her, but after hearing your story and your reasons we realized that it was the best choice." Emma said.

"Especially with the pools defunct. We can't use the full alignment anyways." Cleo added.

"Besides that's not for another fifty years. Who knows what could happen in that time that we can't control." Rikki pointed out. "We never thought that far ahead."

"And we've had way too many close calls as it is," Bella finished for them. "You were so right in that sooner or later we'd slip up and the person wouldn't be someone like our boyfriends that would keep the secret."

"Yeah. Just think about what would have happened if it had been Sophie that found you out instead of Will," Rikki told her.

We all shuddered at that thought. Emma and I hadn't meet her yet, but we'd been told about her. She'd gone back to stay with her, and Will's, parents, but she had promised to visit him

eventually.

"Anyways enough on that, you have to come. I know we didn't start out on the best of terms, but we were wrong about you being like Charlotte." Emma said.

"How do you mean?" I asked.

"Well Charlotte wanted to control everything, and didn't care about keeping it all a secret." Cleo said.

"Yet here I am planning to reveal it all. How is that different?" I asked them.

"Your reasons," Bella answered me. "You wish it could stay a secret, we honestly get that, but at the same time you know that even the best plans to do that can and do fail."

"But unlike Charlotte you don't plan to just walk into the middle of a room and dump a bucket of water on your head. You've actually tried to plan this to get the best result you can, you're not doing it haphazardly." Rikki finished for her.

"I see. It's because the method I'm using is a controlled risk. As controlled as can be, rather than just a blatant here I am look at me I'm a mermaid." I said, understanding their point.

"Exactly. So we want you to join us. Please say you can make it!" Cleo begged me.

I laughed in surrender. "Peace. I give. No need to unleash any more. I'll just head to the ship to pack an overnight bag and leave them a note."

"Why do you need to tell them where you are going? They're not your keepers," Rikki said.

"True, but I bet you told someone in your own homes you were going to stay over at Emma's just because it's the polite thing to do." I replied.

Rikki winced. "OK, you do have a point it would be rude to not tell someone you live with, and I guess since you all stay on that ship all the time they could be considered your house mates."

I nodded. "When should I arrive?"

"Any time between 7 and 8 will be fine. My parents agreed to go out all night and my brother Elliot is staying with a friend too. So it'll just be us girls."

"Cool." I pulled out my phone and used it to see the time. "It's about 4 now so that gives me plenty of time to get ready. I'll see you then." I got up and waved good bye as I headed back to the ship. I had to hurry I had so much to do. Take a bath, pick out an outfit, pack my bag, and of course I had to bring some kind of snack with me. I wish I had more than just three hours to work with.

Thankfully I made it there by 7:30. I wanted to have made it by 7:10 but it took longer than I thought it would to leave. Denman had

stopped me to remind me it was a full moon. I reminded her that was no longer a problem and I'd be fine, I had a theory about it. I'd explained it was based on being ready for the site of the moon and that as long as I didn't get caught unawares I'd be fine. With instructions to call if something went wrong she wished me good night and I hurried off.

I knocked on the door, trying to not collapse from exhaustion, damn swimming is much easier, and breathing hard while I waited politely for the door to be answered. When it was opened Emma took one look at me and rolled her eyes. "You didn't have to run here you know. We wouldn't have started without you and anyways Cleo and Rikki aren't here yet."

"Oh. OK. Can I pass out now then?" I huffed.

Bella came to the door to see who it was, "oh get in here and sit down before you fall down. You'd think you'd be in better shape with all the swimming we do."

"Running...(puff)... on legs...(huff)... much harder." I said falling into a chair they guided me too.

"Water?" Emma offered me a glass with a straw.

"Thank you." I said after draining half of it in one go. "I guess we should practice running and not just spend all day swimming." I was able to talk more normally now.

There was another knock on the door and then it opened, "we're here!" Rikki called out.

"Rikki go in you're blocking the door," Cleo said from behind her.

"Hey guys come on in make yourselves at home." Emma called from the kitchen.

"Hey the house looks great." Rikki said. "Glad to see the renters didn't destroy it on you guys while you were away."

"Oh we still had a lot of cleaning up to do, but it wasn't as bad as we had feared that's for sure." Emma replied.

"Hey, Laura, you made it. Come join us in here," Cleo called to me.

"That is if you can even stand up yet," Bella said jokingly. "She ran the whole way here cause she was worried she'd be late."

I stood up, slowly, and I didn't wobble too much doing it, and joined them in the kitchen. "So I noticed all the windows are shut and shuttered? Worried about tonight for some reason?"

"Nah!" Emma said. "We've got that all sorted, but I don't want any glares on the telly while we are watching movies. It's so distracting."

I could go along with that. It was true after all.



"Anyways, we have a good selection of stuff. Look through it and pick something you like. I'll need a few hands to help me get some stuff down from upstairs."

"We'll help," Cleo and Rikki said.

"Unless you guys have completely changed how you stored stuff we should still remember where stuff is so you won't have to keep pointing it out to us." Cleo added.

"Good point, and we do." Emma said leading them upstairs. "Bella you might want to bring your stuff down we're sleeping in the room down stairs."

"OK." Bella hurried after them.

I settled in front of the TV and started looking at the collection of movies, trying to find something I was in the mood for, but I'd barely gotten the cabinet door open when the front door burst open and a teenage boy ran in.

"Oh hey, sorry to disturb you, I'm Elliot, can you tell me where my sister is there's something I forgot to tell her," he said to me.

"Oh right she said she had a brother." I pointed at the stairs. "She's getting stuff for our sleep over from upstairs."

"Thanks!" He hurried off leaving the door open behind him.

I turned around to go back to what I was doing when the door swung open just a bit more and the full moon reflected off the TV screen. I hadn't been expecting it so I wasn't prepared in the slightest, and by the time some small part of my brain realized what was happening and tried to resist I was too late, far too late.

"Thanks Elliot, now get out of here OK, and don't forget to close the door." Emma said. The door shut cutting off the site of the moon but the damage had already been done.

I stood up and walked over to where Emma was on the stairs. "Oh Emma." I said. "Could you come here?"

She looked at me strange for a moment, then she got an awful look on her face. She took me by the shoulders and looked at me closely. "Laura what happened?"

"I saw the moon, it wants to dance. Will you join me in dancing with the moon on the water, Emma? Please say you will." I said slowly backing up towards the window next to the door pulling her along with me.

Emma turned to face the stairs and yelled up "Guys, we have a problem. Laura's moon..." She broke off as I opened the shutters on the window and caught her unprepared, her head instinctively turned to face the motion and she got the full view of the moon. She had no chance and in seconds was as snared as I was.

"Emma what did you... oh no!" Rikki stopped at the top of the stairs, turned around and darted back the way she came.

"Emma, we should ask the others to dance with us too. It would only be proper." I said.

Emma looked at me, her smile as devoid as mine of anything resembling rational thought, and nodded. We hurried upstairs to where the other girls were waiting in Emma's room.

"Cleo you have to believe me they are both moon struck." Rikki was trying to convince her.

"But we've got that all sorted you know. So how did they end up moon struck?" Cleo asked.

"Guys there here." Bella said.

"Come dance with us," I said. "Let's dance with the moon on the water."

Cleo's eyes bugged out. "Oh no you're right they really are..." Emma threw open the blinds on her bedroom window and Cleo wasn't ready. Neither was Bella. Rikki however was, she spun away and shut her eyes. She made it out the door blind before we could stop her. She quickly typed out a message on her phone as she went she managed to hit send before we caught up to her.

"Come Rikki," we crooned. "Join us. Just let yourself go, and we'll dance with the moon all night."

"No, no. That's quite all right. I think I'll just stay here and keep an eye on things. Someone has to be responsible right?" She said trying to buy some time.

We started to circle her and she darted down stairs not looking at the open window as she dashed through the kitchen and into the living room.

"Now guys let's just all sit down and enjoy a movie together, doesn't that sound nice. A movie just us girls, that was the plan right." Rikki's voice was sounding strained. In hindsight I guess it's understandable as this was the first time she had to deal with four moon struck mermaids at the same time. She was really out numbered. I'm surprised she lasted long enough for guys to get here, of course when they came in the door so did the moon light but she was prepared for that and looked away. Too bad I was too as I held up a big reflective silver tray and caught her.

"Oh no. This is so not going to be good." Zane said. As the only one familiar with moon struck mermaids he decided to take charge. "OK guys. You need to keep them away from water. It'll only make this worse."

We swarmed them, "Come dance with us, the moon is calling and we need to dance." We kept repeating it over and over as we slowly herded the poor boys out the door and towards the water.

"Hey guys I though this was a girls night." We heard Denman call. "I just dropped by because Laura forgot the snacks she planned to bring back at the ship." She took a good look at us. "Uh oh."

"Any help you can give would be useful right now," Zane called. He was trying to fend off Rikki who seemed determined to drag him into the water with her. Ash was having no better luck with Emma, and Will had simply picked Bella up and was carrying her back inside.

"Can you get them all back inside?" Denman called.

"What does it look like we are trying too do?" Zane said.

"Just pick her up and carry her." She yelled.

He did just that, and Ash followed suit. Cleo and I ended up split trying to help free our sisters to join us when Denman poked me in the arm with something, it might have stung but I was suddenly feeling too sleepy to care.

"Sorry for that, but you did make me promise that if this ever happened to knock you out so you could sleep it off." She said to me as she picked me up. "Just keeping my promise."

Just before I drifted off completely I heard Zane ask, "do you have enough of that for the rest of them?" I never did hear the answer.

I woke up the next day, not sure when exactly, but the sun was up so it had to be day time, and slowly looked around. I smelled food, eggs and something else, and crawled out of the sleeping bag I found myself in. I was wearing the same clothes I'd had on last night, and my mouth was really dry.

"Ah good you're awake." Denman was in the kitchen with Zane, Ash, and Will sitting near by.

"What happened last night? And why are you all here?" I mumbled.

Denman handed me a glass of water and a straw, then asked me how much I did I remember.

"Well I remember Emma's brother came by because he forgot to pass on a message and then I looked at the TV and then I was waking up." I said.

"Looks like your theory was right. If you look at a full moon and you are ready for it you can resist, but get caught by surprise and your out of it." She said to me. "Breakfast?"

I heard groans behind me. "Oh god please let us have not done something stupid last night." Emma said.

"I think it's too late for that." Bella said.

"I thought we were done with this." Cleo said.

"I guess not." Rikki looked up. "At least I was able to get the message out before you got me."

"You girls should drink some water and try to eat something," Denman said. "I used a mild sedative on you and it has a side effect of making you very thirsty and hungry."

"You did what?" Emma demanded.

"Oh don't worry," I said. "I made her promise to do that on me if that ever happened so I wouldn't get into any trouble. Glad you remembered."

"Actually it was my idea to have her use it on all of you." Zane said. "It was either that or try to keep you from dragging us into the water with you last night. You kept trying to convince us to go dance with the moon on the water."

Rikki turned a very interesting shade of red, but from the way she buried her face in her pillow I figured it wasn't anger. Denman finished cooking and turned off the stove.

"Well I'm going to head out boys. I trust you'll be able to help them recover. The girls might have agreed to work with me recently but I'm not going to push my luck here now that they are awake and clearly recovered. I'll see you later Laura." She waved as she headed out the door.

"Wait," Emma called. "Why were you even here in the first place."

Denman held up a large, but now empty, bag of chips. "Don't tell me I ran over here and forgot the snacks I'd planned to bring." I said. She just nodded. "Well I guess a thank you for bringing them is warranted and I guess it also caused you to be here when you were most needed. But how did you know you'd need the sedative?"

"You told me to always have it on hand on a full moon. Just in case. I used to think it was a needless precaution."

"Well I think this once it came in very handy," Bella said.

"Thank you." the girls said. Emma, Rikki, and Cleo did look like they'd swallowed something unpleasant though. I guess that might have been because they'd never pictured themselves in a position to actually be thanking Denman for anything.

"Your welcome." Denman replied. "However, I won't force myself on you. Just drink water and make sure to eat something. Have a good day."

We waved goodbye, all of us, and got some food and drank only water. Of course the guys made sure to fill us in on all the interesting stuff we forgot from last night.

"We hate full moons!" We all said when they were done.

## 12. Chapter 12: Going Public

### Authors Note:

We're coming up on the end here. Including this chapter there will only be three more till the end. After that I'll see if I have enough ideas to possibly do a sequel story. Suggestions are welcome once I'm done here.

## Chapter 12: Made Public

The week following the disastrous full moon found us heading to Sea World for the presentation of the research we'd all participated in. We would be standing before a council of five members, all marine biologists with their doctorates, to hopefully convince them that we needed to be protected. We were all justifiably nervous on the way over. This would either go well and we'd be safe to live our lives or it would go bad and we'd be running for the open ocean and fleeing for years to come. Either way we'd passed the point of no return.

The meeting started with introductions, honestly I was so nervous at this point I didn't remember any names, and we proceeded with Denman presenting her findings. There were many questions for her, probing for details and clarifications as necessary. Denman did her best to plead her case for us to be declared a variant of the human race and not a sub human race, as well as endangered.

Once she was finished Dr. Simmons proceeded with his report on his own findings and how they coincided with Denman's and thereby validated her findings. He also answered many questions, and in the end he made the strongest case for our protection as well. He also backed Denman on her standing that we were not in anyway less then human but a true variant simply adapted to life both in and out of the water.

Once he finished the five of us were called forward. We were questioned as well. The questions for us centered more on our own view of ourselves, our lifestyle both in and out of the water, and if our participation truly was voluntary or not. We answered to the best of our ability, and at the end were asked if we would demonstrate the change as final proof that the research was not being fabricated. After we had dried off again, the council thanked us for our time and told us they would have a decision for us in a weeks time. Until then we were to keep the topics of the meeting confidential.

The following week was even worse in the case of nerves then the day's prior to it. All of us, even Emma, Cleo, and Rikki, stayed close to the ship in case of a double cross. Denman did her best not to impose on them overmuch, but they told her that after her actions on the full moon she'd earned a true second chance with them. The whole time we couldn't help running over what might happen at the end of the week. We tried to stay positive but invariably we ended up running worst case scenarios until we'd managed to scare ourselves near to death.

The guys visited us as often as they could and anytime any of us needed to show up for a work shift any of us not also working spent the day shadowing them. This might have been a bit paranoid but we all agreed better safe then sorry. Finally the day came for us to once again stand before the review council and hear their decision.

The response they had for us was full of a lot of technical terms and jargon, but it was the final statements that were what we most wanted to hear. They validated the existence of mermaids as a species and declared us endangered, furthermore they would announce to the public only that mermaids existed and that they lived somewhere on the coast of Australia. Our names and faces would be kept out of any public

report and any further requests for studies would continue to require our consent and cooperation. Denman was credited with the primary research but she declined credit for our discovery saying that belonged to Lewis McCartney. They thanked us and departed, after asking for autographs, somethings are just human nature I guess.

"So now everyone's going to know about us. We'll never be able to have a moments peace again," Cleo groaned as we walked out. I snickered at her.

"You were listening to what they said right?" I asked her.

"Yes, we all were." She said.

"We didn't miss anything. They said they were going to let it be known publicly," Rikki said.

"Yes, mermaids will be publicly recognized as a new species, we won't be." I said.

"But we're mermaids so we will be announced." Emma said, then slapped her forehead. "Oh wait! I get what you're saying. That part at the end. They won't give out our names. People might know there are mermaids but they won't know who."

"Exactly. Unless we actually tell them ourselves they only know that mermaids exist." I said.

"So we can live normal lives as long as we keep our names out of it." Bella asked.

"More or less that's exactly how it works girls," Denman said. "Now if you end up exposed in a hospital or somewhere similar you will be protected by law from being turned over to the media or locked in a tank."

"Cool." They all said.

"Well I'd like to invite you all out to the ship tomorrow for a going away party for Dr. Simmons, and to thank him for his assistance." Denman said. "I hope you all can make it. It's at 8 in the evening so I hope that will be after any work shifts you have."

We all promised to be there and the other girls all left to head home and collapse now that the stress of waiting was done. I went for a swim to excited to sleep.

The next day was crazy. As I went around picking up supplies for the party that night I got asked no less then six times if I'd heard the news. Mermaids were real and they lived somewhere around the coast of Australia. Everyone seemed to be hyped on the news but since there was so much coast no one was going around trying to get everyone soaked just to see if they were a mermaid. Well it was either that or the part where harassing people on the suspicion was still harassment and frowned on. Either way no one went out of their way to splash anyone, even me.

When the girls arrived for the party they were amazed at the outcome of the day and how the news was received.

"It's so cool." Emma said. "Everyone is actually thrilled by the idea instead of hating it."

"I know. I honestly expected people to start protests," I said. "They usually do that in the States."

"Well it looks like people are more open minded here." Cleo said. "I might even tell my family, Dad and Sam took the news well. Kim was the only one that threw a fit and she was scolded for it too."

"My parents already know," Bella said. "Hard to hide things when you're nine and all. If they hadn't found out I don't think I'd have made it nearly as long as I did otherwise."

"My Dad thought it was kinda cool too. He's real cool that way. I guess I can trust him with it after all." Rikki mused. "What about your family Emma?"

"Mom and Dad were positive about it. Elliot wants to ask one on a date. I told him he's probably too young for one. Didn't seem to phase him though." Emma said with a laugh.

"Boys!" The rest of us said and then we all broke into laughter.

"Ah good you're all here." Denman said coming up onto the deck. "Dr. Simmons and I each have something for you." She walked over and placed five envelopes on the table in front of us. Each one had one of our names on it.

"Yes. These are for you." Dr. Simmons also placed more of the same down. "You young ladies have earned this."

I picked up my two and simply held onto them. Having worked as Denman's assistant for the past couple of years I had a good idea what they contained. I was therefore more interested in the reactions of what the others would be when they opened them. I was not disappointed.

"Are you serious?" Emma just stared.

"We can't accept this." Rikki said.

"Yes you can. It is standard to reimburse people for their participation in any type of study, be it research or other." Dr. Simmons said.

"But the amount. It's rather large." Bella claimed. "Surely it's too much."

"Not really. We did need to preform many tests and collect a large and varied amount of tissue, blood, and DNA samples from you. Such is considered standard for those." he countered.

"We did however pay any taxes up front that would be levied by the governments of your home nations though." Denman said. "Thus that full amount is yours, you don't have to report it as income."

"Just say thank you and let it go girls." I advised. "After two years I've learned that you shouldn't turn down a pay check just cause you don't think you did enough work. She usually just ignored my protests

anyways."

"Well then thank you," Cleo said. "Now, Dr. Simmons, what's this card for?"

"Ah that." He took a seat. "That contains information that will allow you to contact me should you wish to talk or arrange to visit. I have enjoyed meeting you girls and discovering what you can do. You have done a great thing for me. I am old, in my late 60's if you should know, and I am aware that my time is running short. I have seen and done many things in my life and I would have met the end with no regrets, but now I shall also meet it with a sense of satisfaction that I have participated in something great. The discovery, validation, and protection of a new species of life. One cannot ask for more out of life. And so I thank you and welcome you to talk with me or visit anytime you should desire to do so."

"Your welcome," we all said. "We'll make sure to keep in touch."

"Well then, I believe we assembled here to celebrate the success of our research as well as the end of my stay here in your home country. So let us begin." Dr. Simmons said. "And for tonight we shall dispense with formalities so please call me Randolph."

We spent the rest of the night enjoying ourselves and in the morning accompanied him to the airport for his departure. We wished him well and waited till he had passed security and gone out of sight before heading back. Over the next few days we spent a lot of time at the cafe, listening to talk about mermaids and how cool it would be if they would come and visit, and planning the best way for the girls to tell their families. In the end we decided the best way would be for each of them to do all the explaining personally but that the rest of us would be there for both moral support and if necessary additional proof. That left us with the tough task of deciding which family to tell first. In the end we simply pulled names out of a hat and Emma was going to be first, Cleo second, and Rikki third. We then agreed to meet at Emma's next weekend.

Things were going well. Mermaids were public but only the guys knew that we were them and they wouldn't tell. We'd gotten the best we could have ever hoped for, acceptance and anonymity both at the same time.

### 13. Chapter 13: Families

#### Authors Note:

I wanted to do a chapter where they told their family's because while watching the series I kept trying to figure out why they wouldn't trust them. Well other than Kim anyways. Really felt that she should never know. Well here we go this should be fun.

#### Chapter 13: Telling the Families

We met Emma at her house that Saturday shortly after lunch. Emma was not her usual calm and collected self. Far from. She kept pacing back and forth talking to her self and us with almost no distinction between which she was doing. She'd been doing this for the past hour



we'd been here and probably even before we'd arrived too.

"They're going to hate me." Turn. "I just know they're going to be so mad. We never keep secrets," turn, "and this is a big one. You really think they'll be OK with this." Turn. "I mean it's not like I could tell them before. You think they'll ever trust me again?" Turn. And on and on.

"Ya know, I think we may finally figure out if it really is possible to wear a grove into a floor." I said.

"She's really freaked and it's starting to get me all freaked out too," Cleo said. "How do we calm her down?"

"Well usually you try to shock the person to break their train of thought, but the only methods I can think of to do that on short notice is to either slap her or toss a glass of cold water on her." I answered.

"Neither of those will probably help much right now," Bella said.

"Emma!" Rikki half shouted. "Emma! HEY EMMA!"

She finally stopped and turned to face us. She was pale as a ghost and so nervous her hands were starting to shake.

"Emma, breath." I told her. She started taking in big fast gulps of air. "Slowly, you won't do yourself any good if you hyperventilate." She slowed her breathing and it seemed to help as color slowly returned to her.

"It's going to be OK Emma, we're here for you," Bella said. "Here sit down and try to relax. Your family will be home soon and you have to decide how you plan to tell them."

"Yeah. Don't worry too much Emma. Your family is more open and trusting than mine," Cleo reminded her.

"Your dad's pretty cool, Cleo." I said. "At least he certainly was the few times I've met him."

"He really is," Cleo agreed. "So is Sam, but you've never met my sister Kim. I don't trust her to keep this to herself at all."

"That bad?" I asked.

"Worse!" They all answered. Then we broke into laughter at how funny it all seemed.

"Oh. I needed that." Emma said between giggles. "I feel better now."

"That's good. You were starting to drive us bonkers." Rikki told her.

"Short drive for some of us." I mumbled

Rikki threw a throw pillow from the chair she was sitting on at me. We all burst out laughing again.

"So I figured I'd start by talking with them about the recent news and then just show them. It seems to make things go quicker."

"They're here." Bella said from over by the front window.

"Show time," I said.

Emma stood up and headed to the door to greet her family while Cleo headed into the kitchen to fill a cup with water. She came back and held it delicately.

"Cleo try to look like you are holding a glass of water and not a live grenade," I hissed at her as Emma's parents and brother walked in the door. She wasn't able to answer me as Emma had started talking to her family at that point.

"Mum. Dad. Elliot. I have something I need to talk with you about and I think it would be best if you were all sitting down."

"Well OK dear. We're always here to help if that's what you need." Her mother said. They all headed over to the table and took a seat.

"Well it has to do with the recent news that you've all heard and have been talking about for the past half of the week." Emma started.

"You mean about the mermaids?" Her father asked. She nodded. "Well what about it?"

"Cleo." She called waving her over. "Well it will be easier to show you but please don't get mad at me for keeping this a secret for so long."

Cleo walked over and held out the glass and Emma dipped her hand in. Cleo quickly put the glass down and stood behind her ready to catch.

"Wait you don't mean..." her mother started as Emma changed and fell over into backwards where Cleo was waiting. The room went silent and Emma just waited looking at her family's stunned faces.

It was Elliot that broke the frozen tableau by grabbing the glass of water and flinging it in a circle catching us all.

"Elliot that was not very polite. You apologize to Emma's... friends... Oh my." Her mother said as we all stood there with various reactions before all falling over as our tails appeared.

"Elliot!" Emma yelled at him. "What was that for?"

"Well the news said there were five of them and well there's five of you so ya know it kinda made sense." He explained.

"When did he get so smart?" Cleo asked.

"No idea." Emma answered.

"Emma how long have you been, well, you know?" Her father asked.

"Remember when I quit swimming?" They nodded. "Since then. Now you know why I had to quit."

"Well I guess that makes sense now. Explains a lot too." Her mother said. "Oh dear where are my manners." She stood and faced me. "I'm Lisa Gilbert and this is my husband Neil. You must be Emma's new friend."

"Hi," I said from where I was sprawled half on half off the couch. I held out my hand. "I'm Laura, pleased to meet you both."

"Where are you from I don't recognize your accent." Her father, Neil, asked politely.

"The U.S. California to be exact." I answered.

"That's a long way from home. How do you like it here?" Miss Gilbert asked me.

I looked at each of the other girls in our group and smiled. "It's growing on me. I've made some real great friends here."

"That's nice but can we dry off now?" Rikki complained.

"Elliot go get the girls some towels please." Miss Gilbert commanded. "Emma, girls, I hope you don't mind answering some questions for us."

"Not at all Mum. Just please don't tell anyone. I know mermaids are in the news but not our names and all we'd still like to keep that quiet if we could."

They both agreed and after a long hard stare at Elliot he agreed as well. He handed us some hand towels from the kitchen and after we were all dried off we spent the rest of the day answering their many questions most about all the times Emma had tried to avoid something or other. They said a whole lot made sense to them now. Elliot even went over to Rikki and asked about the time she'd saved him when he'd first tried surfing. Rikki groaned and said, "you still remember that!" We all laughed.

It was early the next morning when I heard a coffee cup clunk down next to my bed. I tried to ignore the aroma but had no luck. As I emerged from my nest of sheets and blankets I was greeted with the site of four way too awake and bright eyed friends. I groaned and tried to go back to sleep. They didn't let me get away with the attempt.

Up on deck Denman was puttering around with her dive gear. I looked at her questioningly.

"I spend so much time diving for work I though it might be nice to go and just do it for fun once. Where are you girls off to so early?" She told me.

"To see my Dad." Cleo said. "We told Emma's family yesterday."

"How did they take it?" She asked Emma.

"Quite well actually, I can't believe I was so worried and it went so easy." She answered.

"Well there's more coffee over there, it's fresh if you want some." She pointed. "Have a good day!" She headed up to the second deck to start the boat. Our research done the guys had been freed up to accept other jobs now that this one was done and had all been quick to. So now she had to do her own driving. "Would you girls mind casting off the lines for me on your way out please?"

We agreed and after I quickly cooled and drained my coffee we left the ship. "So to your house now Cleo?"

"Yup. If we hurry we can catch him before he leaves for work." She answered.

"And before Kim is awake either." Rikki said.

"Well that explains why you all came to get me before the sun had even bothered to wake up for the day." I mumbled still half asleep despite both cups of coffee. A morning person I am not.

"Come on we need to hurry," Emma said breaking into a light jog quickly followed by the others.

"Ugh! Not only do I have to wake up at this unholy hour of the day, but now I have to run too." I complained to the sky.

"Come on," Bella said pulling on my arm. "You're the one that said you needed to do more exercise on dry land."

"This was not what I meant!" I muttered as I started jogging behind them. One good thing from it was that the light run really did wonders for getting the blood flowing and that got the caffeine to me that much sooner. After which I'd darted ahead and was egging the others on to hurry while half running and half bouncing.

"One minute she's complaining, and the next she's doing this! What's up with that?" Cleo commented.

"I think the coffee's working now," Rikki answered.

"Less talk more hurry!" I called back. They found me amusing for some reason.

"It's this street back here you know." Emma called out as they all turned down a street I'd completely run past half a block ago. Somehow it didn't bother me in the slightest as I backtracked and caught up to them joining in the laughter.

A short while later we arrived at Cleo's house and found her Dad and her stepmother Sam eating an early breakfast.

"Morning Dad. Morning Sam." Cleo greeted them. "Do you have time to talk about something before you head to work today?"

"Of course dear. Is that why you're up so early?" He said.

"No. I'm up early because they cheated and bribed me with fresh coffee, or I'd still be asleep right now like everyone else that doesn't have a job with a start time determined by the tides. How do you manage?" I joked.

Both he and Sam chuckled at me, not bothered in the slightest. "You do it long enough and you get used to it." He said between chuckles.

"I'll take your word for it." I replied.

With the mood lightened by my joking comments we were invited to join them at the table and Don even poured me a fresh cup of coffee too. That got my stamp of approval. I picked it up and curled my hand around the outside of the cup cooling it off as I pretended to blow on it to cool it off. I think I impressed the girls with how subtly I'd done that if the raised eyebrows were any indication.

"So Cleo dear what's so important that you would get up this early just to talk to me about it?" He asked.

"Well it has to do with the recent news and all." She started.

"Cleo don't worry. I think these mermaid are smart enough to not get caught in a fishing net." He said.

Emma and Rikki tried not to laugh. Obviously part of the story they hadn't told Bella and me about yet.

"Well it's not that I'm worried about." She dipped her hands into the glass of water in front of her. "It'll be easier to understand once you see it."

"See what dear?" He asked taking a bite of his toast. He looked up as she changed and started to choke on it. I gave him a few pats on the back until he recovered. Sam however had been about to take a drink of her water and she'd dropped the cup and it spilled everywhere. We'd had plenty of time to avoid it but we didn't bother. It would save time.

"Cleo! You?" he seemed stunned. "All of you?"

"Yes Dad. I'm sorry it took so long to tell you, but I was so worried you'd be upset." Cleo told him.

"Well I'm surprised that's for sure, but you could have told me this tonight." He said.

"Not without telling Kim too, and even if people know that mermaids are real they don't know that we are the mermaids and you know Kim." She explained. "She wouldn't keep this to herself."

"She's right Don. You heard how upset Kim was when it was announced on the news. If she knew her own sister was one she'd make sure to tell everyone." Sam said. "Speaking of which I supposed you should all get dried off before she wakes up."

"Yes please." We all answered.

"Well I don't quite know what to say. I do think you should tell your

sister but I guess you're right about that being your choice. I guess I don't really have to worry about you getting caught in a fishing net though. I know my daughter is too smart for that." Don said after taking a deep breath.

Sam got us all towels and we started drying off thanking her as we did.

"Actually about that," Cleo said and then told us about the time she tried to save some sea turtles from a former member of her father's fishing team. We couldn't stop laughing. Even Don and Sam couldn't stop though they did keep apologizing for laughing so hard.

"I'm glad you told us," Don said. "I'm glad you trust us. I know your sister can be a bit headstrong but give her time she'll come around and I hope you can tell her one day."

"Yes thank you for trusting me," Sam said as well. "At least now I know why you didn't want to come on the water that time I took you all to the beach."

"Yeah it's sometimes hard to live with, but there's a lot of good stuff too. I get to swim with the dolphins and I can go exploring all the coral reefs." She looked at each of us in turn, "and I've got some of the best mates anyone could ever ask for to share it all with too."

We all joined in a group hug, even Rikki, though she did roll her eyes. Don and Sam surprised us by joining in, but we didn't mind, especially after seeing how much it made Cleo smile.

"Well I have to head out now. Have to catch the tide and all. You have a good day, and Cleo please try to not get caught in a net if you ever try to come and visit me at work." He said the last with a smile so we all knew he was just joking with her.

We wished him well and Sam asked if we'd like to stay for some breakfast. We accepted and even offered to help her cook it. We were happily discussing our view on eating fish when Kim came down stairs and asked what all the racket was for.

"Nothing Kim. I just invited my friends over for the day and we're having breakfast." Cleo told her.

"Why do you get to have your friends over so early in the morning and I'm not. It's not fair you!" Kim said.

"I'm so glad I don't have a younger sister," I said. "They seem like a lot of trouble."

"You have no idea," Cleo said. "She's always taking my clothes."

"Hey! I'm allowed to borrow them," Kim blurted.

"She never returns them." Cleo said.

"That sounds like taking to me," Bella said.

"At least I have a brother," Emma said, "He won't go near my

closet."

"Are you going to let them do this to me?" Kim demanded from Sam looking for some sympathy.

"Do you plan to ever return what you borrowed?" She asked simply.

Kim huffed, stomped her foot, and stormed up the stairs tossing down an "I'll get you for this," as she went.

I couldn't help it. I burst out laughing at how ridiculous she looked doing it at her age. "Cleo you didn't say your sister was still five." I was rewarded with a scream of teenage fury from above. Somehow that only made the others start laughing with me.

Later that afternoon we followed Rikki to her house. Turns out that telling her father was the easiest of all.

"Dad, I need to talk to you about something, and I hope you won't get mad at me." Rikki started.

"This going to be about you telling me you grow a tail and spend the day swimming in the ocean?" He asked calmly.

"H.. h... how did you know?" Rikki asked. I didn't blame her for stuttering, all of us were trying to pick our bottom jaws off the ground.

"Well after hearing the news I started putting a few things together, in my head you know, and it just all started to make a weird kind of sense you know. I figured you'd tell me sooner or later. I'm not mad at you, no matter what you'll always be my daughter and I'll always love you, this won't change that. Actually I'm kind of glad it happened." He gestured to the rest of us. "You've made some great friends because of it and you seem much happier all told and what father wouldn't want to see his child happy."

Rikki stood there for a moment then rushed to her father and gave him a big hug. "Love you too Dad," she told him. "And here I was getting all worried and you already knew."

"I do supposed this means that you'll want to stay here near the ocean from now on though." He and Rikki shared a laugh. "Well would you introduce me to your new friends. Emma and Cleo I know and am glad to see come around again."

"Sure Dad," Rikki said. "Dad this is Bella and Laura. Bella, Laura I'd like you to meet my Dad, Terry Chadwick."

"Please to meet you," we both said as we exchanged a hand shake with him.

"Likewise," he replied. "So would you girls like to join us for lunch? I caught some nice fish off the docks earlier today? That is if you don't mind fish."

"Fish is good I said. Freshly caught fish is the absolute best!" I answered.

"I was planning to grill them, that OK with you?" He said asking our opinion.

"How are you still single?" I responded with an excited grin that said clear as day that would be just fine.

He let out a please laugh, "Rikki, I like this new friend of yours. A right good young lady, she is."

Rikki smiled a completely open, unguarded smile, "I wonder about that myself a lot too." She said at the same time.

Her Dad blushed a bit at that and waved us over to the porch. We spent the rest of the afternoon in pleasant conversation with him. And for the record, that man can cook!

## 14. Chapter 14: New Home

### Authors Note:

Well here we are at the end. I want to thank everyone that has read this, my first, fanfic. I'm glad you've all enjoyed the story and I've very much enjoyed your replies and feedback.

As for why I didn't have them tell Kim last chapter it has nothing to do with not liking Kim as a character and more from having had two younger siblings myself growing up. They both at one point were at the age where they felt that any privilege I got or anything special that I got to do was unfair, and they were fast to whine to anyone that would listen about how unfair it was. If I do get an idea for a sequel and it progresses to the point where Kim is old enough to look back and say "I was a total brat how did you not strangle me growing up?" I might work in her being told. Hey my siblings got to that point so it's not impossible that Kim will too, she's just not there right now.

### Chapter 14: New Home

I woke up late, my mind still going over the phone call to my parents I'd had the previous night and the decision I'd made. It has been a week since my new friends had told their families and I had made a decision of my own. Now I just had to tell everyone else.

The first thing I noticed was the rocking of the ship wasn't the same as it usually was. It was a more extreme and more gentle telling me without words we were anchored in the open water and not the marina. This didn't worry me too much and so I got dressed for the day and went up on deck.

The first thing I noticed upon arriving on deck was that we were very close to Mako but not right on it. A quick look to a few other reference points and I knew we were parked right near some of the best underwater scenery in the area. The fact that Denman's diving gear wasn't on the ship told me all I needed to know. She'd gone sightseeing.

Smiling I went to the galley in search of a really late breakfast while I waited for her to return. I only had to wait about twenty minutes before the sound of splashing at the aft of the ship informed



me she had returned.

"Good afternoon Laura." She greeted me. "Mind giving me a hand up here?"

"Your soaking wet you know." I said holding out my hand.

She thought about that for a second and then waved me back. I rolled my eyes and helped pull her out anyways. We were far from anyone that might see us and I had a towel close to hand anyways.

"Thanks for the hand."

"No worries. No one around for miles and we'd see anyone coming from a real long way off."

She chuckled pleasantly and began to get out of her gear.

"Sorry to drag you all the way out here. I was so eager to just see what was out here when I wasn't on business that I forgot to ask you if you had any plans on shore before leaving. I haven't gone diving just to see things for my own enjoyment in so long I never realized how much I actually miss it."

"For that you're forgiven." I laughed. "Really when was the last time you had what could be considered a real vacation?"

"Well before I met you. Years before actually." She looked a bit wistful.

"Long past time I'd say then." I sat up now dry. "Can I talk to you about something?"

"Sure. Anything."

"I talked to my folks last night, and I asked their opinion of something." I hesitated unsure of how to continue.

"Let me guess, you want to stay here with the girls." She said with a smile.

"Yeah. That obvious?"

"Only to someone that knows you well." She sat down now free of her gear. "Listen, for a long time now you thought you were alone in all this. The sole remaining mermaid. You know now that is not true and I'm not surprised you want to stay close to them. I think it's a good idea, everyone needs others around them that they don't have to hide who they really are from. No matter how much I study, or associate with mermaids I won't ever truly understand what it really means to be one."

"Never thought of it like that." I admitted.

"So on that note what help do you need from me?"

"That sorta sums it up. I have no idea what I'd need to move here."

"Well first off it'll be easier to get you a student visa, you've

learned enough under me to enter any local university and officially get a degree in a Marine Biology major. I can help you with the paper work for that easy enough." She offered.

"And our contract?" I asked.

"Fulfilled. So no worries there. I'll even give you a full recommendation. You earned it in my opinion." She said. "And I kept records of all the work you helped out with, slightly edited to avoid mention of you being a mermaid, as well as all the basic academic studies you completed with me as your acting professor. You should be well on your way with no need to redo most of the basic course work."

"Thank you. That's more than I'd hoped for, more than I was even going to ask for." I was feeling a bit choked up from gratitude. "I don't know how I'd ever repay you for this."

She started laughing, "oh you don't have to worry about that. You've earned all of this with your own hard work. So don't feel you need to repay me in anyway. If it helps consider this a form of non-monetary pay for all your work."

I just nodded. I felt a great swelling feeling inside. It was pride, but a good kind of pride. Pride for a job well done. Pride for a reward hard earned and honestly deserved. It felt good. "Thank you."

"Your welcome. Now shall we head back or did you wish to meet me there?"

"Let's head back. I need to meet the girls and tell them the good news. What time is it anyways."

"About 2 in the afternoon. You really like to sleep late." She said with a laugh as she headed up to the bridge to get us underway.

"On second thought, I'll race you back!" I called up.

"You wouldn't mind giving me a short head start to get up to speed first would you?" She called back down.

"Sure why not. I'll even stay on the ship until you get up to speed, and I'll even dive off the back so I have to turn around first."

We both laughed as she revved the engine and got the ship moving. I still won.

I met the girls at the cafe around 4. Emma was just finishing her shift and Rikki was meeting with Zane. She was going to resume helping at the cafe but only in the capacity of curbing his bad ideas and providing some of her own to help the business grow. I could see the writing on the wall. She was starting to forgive him and he was actually learning from his mistakes. Maybe in time they could get back together and have it work, but one step at a time this time around.

Once Cleo and Bella arrived we all took over one of the back booths and I told them my news.

"Well I had a long talk with my parents last night and I've decided that I'm going to stay here. They support me in this and while we will miss each other we can always visit, but I feel more at home here for some reason." I told them.

"And Denman?" Cleo asked.

"She's going to help me get enrolled in a local university and get a student visa so I can stay here too." I answered.

"But don't you work for her?" Bella asked.

"I asked her about that too. She said that I've fulfilled our contract and that what I've learned from all the work we've done will help me get my own degree and make my own name in the field. As a teacher she's quite proud of me." I said with a smile.

"Denman, huh." Emma said. "Who'd have thought she'd have changed so much from when we first met her."

"I know right," Rikki agreed. "I might actually forgive her, someday. Maybe."

We all laughed a bit at that. "Only thing I have to do now is find a place to live. I could use some help on that."

"My lease is about to be up and I could always move up to a two bedroom and you could room with me." Bella offered. "It would end up saving me money with the split rent and we won't have to run and hide from each other if there's an accident with water."

"As long as you're OK with it," she nodded. "Then I'll accept. I do have to admit having roommates I don't have to hide from is kinda what I've gotten used to on the ship."

They all laughed again. I just smiled.

"Well now that it's official we have something to welcome you to your new home." Cleo said as the girls put two small boxes on the table in front of me.

"What are these?" I asked.

"You're supposed to open them and find out. That's how it usually works." Emma told me.

I laughed at that and after removing the ribbons holding the boxes closed opened them to find two necklaces. The first was a simple leather cord with a blue stone at the end. It was a match for the ones they all wore. After that I probably guess what the other one would be and I would have been right. It was a silver locket on a silver chain. The only difference was the stone that like all the others was different. The stone on mine was a reddish yellow topaz that almost perfectly matched my hair.

"Thank you. I never expected you to welcome me quite like this." I said choked up from the unexpected sense of belonging. "Thank you."

"We had the pendant made by the same person that made all the others

so it's truly part of the set and the other one is a moonstone from the moon pool at Mako." Rikki explained. "All we know is they tend to store moon light and have something to do with how we all became mermaids in the first place. So you can see how they are something special for us."

I held my hair out of the way as they helped me put them on. "Thank you, it means a lot to me knowing how important they are and what they mean. I'm glad to be part of this all."

"Well we are glad you came. I know we didn't start out on the best of terms but things worked out and now we don't have to worry as much if something major goes wrong for us down the road." Cleo said. "And it seems that we're all supposed to be together anyways, you know given how our powers work together and all."

We all shared a good natured laugh, and I held up my glass. "A toast to friends."

"To friends!" They replied and we carefully clinked our glasses together and took a sip through the straws.

"Now if you'll excuse me I need to get ready for our performance tonight," Bella said.

"I can't wait. You're an amazing singer." I replied.

She blushed a bit at the compliment and headed up towards the stage.

She sang late into the night, the large crowd constantly calling for more, and I cheered along with all the rest just as loud. The next day I joined them for their morning swim. The five of us racing through the water, exploring, and generally sharing something that no one else would ever truly be able to understand. For the first time I no longer felt alone in the water. Because now I had my sisters here with me, and we belonged together.

## 15. Authors Note

Authors Note:

First chapter of the sequel is up. Hiden! But for how long? I hope you all enjoy that as much as you did this one.

End  
file.